OBSTACLEシリーズ
激突のヘクセンナハト
I
川上稔
イラスト／さとやす（TENKY）
協力／剣康之
電撃文庫

OBSTACLE Series

Clash of Hexennacht
I

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Design: Watanabe Kouichi (2725 Inc)

設定資料集——一部だよ！

——というわけで、ヘクセンナハト開始前における、自分の手による資料関係とかデザインとかいろいろ開示ー。イメージの補完になれば幸いです。（イラスト解説：川上稔）

【各務（かがみ）・鏡（かがみ）】

『ディカイオシュネを持つと……』

初めの話では「20メートルでもいいか」というのもあったんですが、とりあえず正気に戻って5メートル。でも構えてみると、足元から肩までの高さもプラスされて全高は6メートル超えるんだなあ、とか。この頃のディカイオシュネは、全体が左右に割れて砲になる、というくらいのギミックで考えてました。また、聖騎士のシルエットが結構ダボっとしてるので、剣を構えた動きが解るように、脚部を大きめに、背を伸ばすために足先を立てよう、とか、思案が入ります。

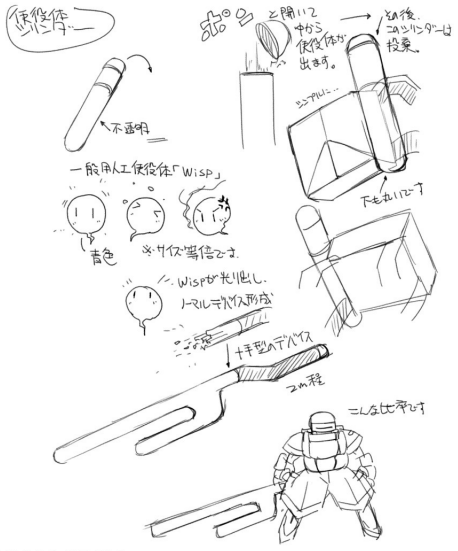
『各務概要』

他も描いてますが、とりあえず今回は各務で。
デザインとしてはスーツ系。乗馬服のようなイメージがあるのは、高貴、上から目線とか、そんなことを考えていたからですね。手袋つけて、ちょっと異質感もありあり、とか。

『マギノフレーム形態』

初期のデザイン案では、こんな感じに今よりもっと聖騎士系でした。マントやスカートなど、あると作画で手脚隠れて楽かな、とも思ったんですが、逆に陰から見える部分を描き損じる可能性があるかなー、というのと、マントなどの翻りは描く人によって表現が変わりやすいので、アシスタントの人に作画を投げるのも厄介か、と、そこらへん外してます。

【U.A.H.J.男性隊員】



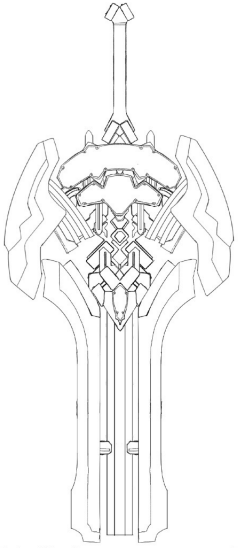
『補足説明』

とにかく人数を描く可能性があるので、作画しやすいように、というのがありますが、仕組みとしては押さえて置きたい感じで。シリンダーは人工使役体の活性保管用で、戦闘後、使役体はバックパック内に保管されます。

『隊員概要』

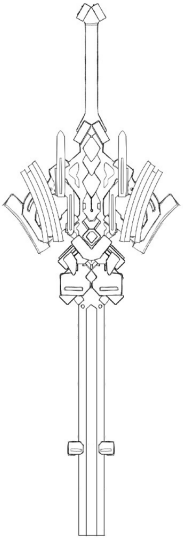
序盤で光太郎の指揮の下、各務を取り押さえようとした男性隊員達です。普段は隊服ですが、今回は制圧用装備。パワーハンドなどはパッシブ系の術式では動かしづらい部分もあるので、機械、化科学的な工夫も入っている、と考えてます。パワーハンドの大きさをベースに、各ポケットとか大きさが決まっているので、どことなくブカブカ系ですね。

【デバイス：ディカイオシュネ】



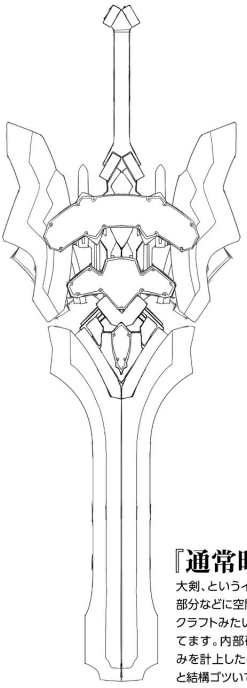
『砲撃時』

マギノ時にスラスターとなる外装で全体を囲い、出力を逃がさないように。通常時は戦闘機で、砲撃時はボスな感じかなー、と思っていたり。とにかく膨らむので、各務が持ったときにちゃんと構えられるかを測定しながらデザインしてました。



『メインフレーム』

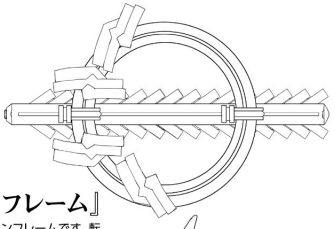
刃と鍔部分の外装を外すと、こんな感じ。メインフレームは加速器を主軸とした変形レールの重なりで、砲撃時にはこれらのレールごと外装が展開します。



『通常時』

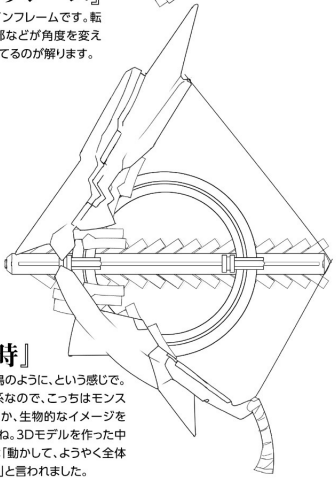
大剣、というイメージですが、鍔部分などに空間を置き、昔のエアクラフトみたいなレトロ感を入れてます。内部砲身の太さから厚みを計上したので、3Dモデルだと結構ゴツいですね。

【デバイス：朱竜胆（あけりんどう）】



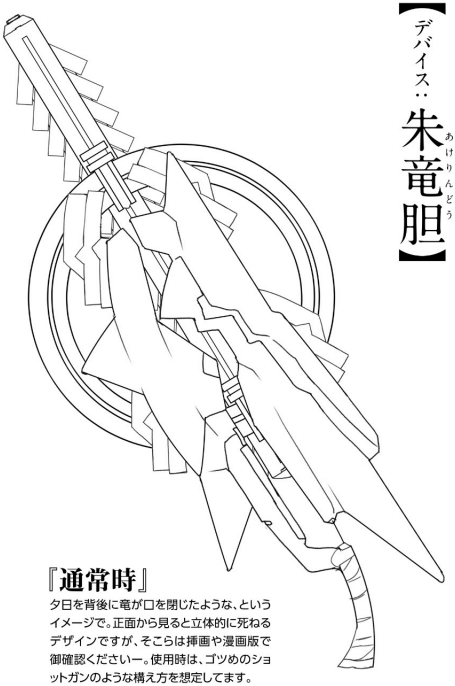
『メインフレーム』

砲撃時のメインフレームです。転輪上の支点部などが角度を変えながら移動してるのが解ります。



『砲撃時』

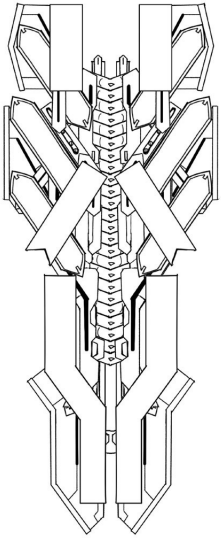
竜のように、鳥のように、という感じで。各務が武器系なので、こっちはモンスター系というか、生物的なイメージを強くしてますね。3Dモデルを作った中本さんからは「動かして、ようやく全体の形が解った」と言われました。



『通常時』

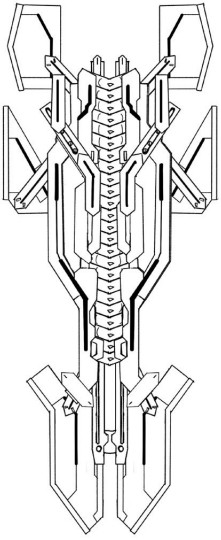
夕日を背後に竜が口を閉じたような、というイメージで。正面から見ると立体的に死ねるデザインですが、そこらは挿画や漫画版で御確認くださいー。使用時は、ゴツめのショットガンのような構え方を想定してます。

【デバイス：ヘッジホッグ】



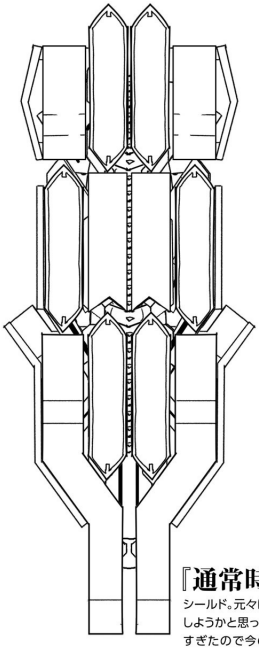
『砲撃時』

元々が槍にしようと思っていたので、穂先型となります。加速路上には光杭が作られて射出。上下交叉もあって複雑なんですが、3Dモデル担当の中本さんが各部のクリアランスをしっかりとってくれたので、作画上でも問題なく動いてます。



『メインフレーム』

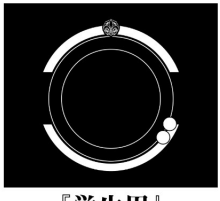
砲撃時のメインフレームです。上部シールド、装甲類がかなり複雑に交叉するので、レールやアームがクリアランスぎりぎりで動いてます。下側の装甲は左右が立っていて、側面を担当してますね。



『通常時』

シールド。元々は柄を付けて槍にしようかと思ってたんですが、長すぎたので今の形に。米国製ということもあって、戦車のようなイメージも入れています。

【術式陣】



『学生用』

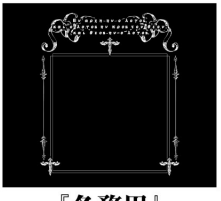
女子用です。シンプルな円陣パターンに、ボタン二つ。上下の太い枠は、フリックなどする補助スイッチです。

『学長用』

花形の術式陣で、花弁が操作系となっています。 円陣はフランス語ですが、これは学長がフランス出身だからですね。

『堀之内用』

とにかく派手な祝詞と楓と鳥居模様。コンパクトじゃないので、隣に人がいたときの威圧感が凄そうです。でも中央上部には、学院の紋章入れてるあたりが真面目というか。



『各務用』

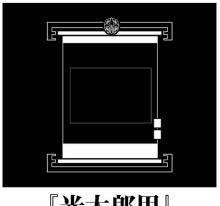
聖騎士なので十字架と剣のイメージ。四角さはお堅さの表現。文字はギリシャ語で、聖書の警句です。

『U.A.H.用』

魔女用です。学生などが使うものより、上下の操作部にテーブルが付き、事務作業などを楽に行うことが出来ます。

『教員用』

主張の強い教員達だ……。だけど年齢が見た目で解りにくいので、こうしておかないとちょっと危険。



『光太郎用』

男性が使用するのは、大体がこの形です。光太郎の場合、学院に入ることもあって学院の紋章がついています。

『ハンター用』

U.S.A.H.の一般兵士用で使われているものと大体共用です。左右上や下の操作パネルが、多機能性を示します。左右の英語は米国国歌。

Preface

Title Page

OBSTACLE シリーズ

激突のセンチハート

THE MAGICAL GIRL WHOSE HEART IS BROKEN WILL LOSE!

川上稔
イラスト／さとやす（TENKY）
協力／剣康之

The magical girl whose heart is broken will lose!

Family of the Hunter

『狩人の家系』

少女は、夏休みの課題を進めていた。その内の一つは、家族の繋がりを大事にという理由で設けられた〝家名の由来を調べなさい〟だった。

だから少女は、まだ午後始まったばかりの砂浜の上、長丁場となっている父親のバーベキューに付き合いながら、

「ねえパパ、何でうちはハンターって言うの」

「そりゃあ、……ハンターだったんじゃないか……？」

「パパ知らないの？　じゃあパパのパパは？　知ってる？」

「いや、パパのパパは婿養子でなあ……。銀行員からアル中経て酒屋のオヤジだぞ確か」

「じゃあ、パパのママは？」

「いや、パパのママはどっちかっていうと打撃系で、それお前に遺伝してるっていうか……」

「じゃあうち、ハンターじゃないじゃん」

「いや、……パパのママの家系の何処かとか、御近所にいたっぽくない？　いたよ多分」

「パパ、それ赤の他人ってやつに行きつつある」

「おお、エルシーお前難しい言葉憶えたな！　肉食っていいぞ！」

食った。味付けを変えてくるから意外に飽きないのが困りものだ。

父は、何やら五年継ぎ足してるという自家秘伝のソースに漬けた肉を新しく乗せながら、

「うーん、どっかでハンターだったんじゃないか？　でもまあ、そんな家名あっても、格好だけだよなあ今。だってパパ、動物大好きだし」

「うん、美味しいよね。牛や豚作った神様は天才だと思うよ」

父が手の平を出してきたので握手した。それで代わりに、

「じゃあ、ボクのエルシーって名前は？」

「何だと思う？」

「ガッコだと背が低いからロリコンの略称でLCだとか言われてる」

「いじめだな解りやすく！」

「いや、物理で返してるから」

「魔法じゃないのか！　じゃあいいぞ！」

いいらしい。ともあれ父は、こっちに別の肉をナイフで出して、

「お前が生まれたとき、凄く小さくてな。ママ、数学系魔女だったろ、それで〝不思議の国のアリス〟に掛けて、エルシーってな。アリスの短縮形エルシーだから、小さいけど大きくなれるし、巨女ジャンル？　でもまあ、いろいろあっても必ず家に戻ってこれるように、って」

「……何でアリスの短縮形がエルシーって、長くなんの？」

「どうしてハンターか解らないパパが答えられると思うか？　んン？　あと、アリスの作者は重度ロリコンだったけど、それは関係ないから将来思いだしても安心しとけよ？」

今すごく安心してるけど要らん知識だよパパ。あと何でハンターなんだ一体。

A girl was working on her summer homework. One assignment asked her to look into the origin of her family name to demonstrate the importance of family bonds.

That was why the girl asked what she did as she helped her father grill on a long stretch of beach that early afternoon.

“Hey, papa. Why are we the Hunters?”

“Probably because we were hunters.”

“You don’t know? Then what was your papa? Do you know that?”

“Well, my papa took on my mama’s last name. He worked at a bank until his alcoholism led him to run a bar.”

“Then what was your mama?”

“She was more the punching type, which you seem to have inherited.”

“Then we aren’t hunters at all.”

“Well… I think there might have been one in my mama’s family’s neighborhood. Yeah, I’m sure of it.”

“Papa, wouldn’t they be a complete stranger?”

“Oh, you’re a clever one, Elsie! Have some meat!”

She did. The problem was how she never got tired of it because he would change the seasonings each time.

He then added on some more meat marinated in the secret family sauce he had developed five years before.

“Hmm, I wonder where the Hunter name came from. Well, that name must only be for show. I love animals, after all.”

“Yeah, they taste so good. God must have been a genius to invent beef and pork.”

Her father held out his hand, so she shook it. She then asked something else.

“Then what about my name Elsie?”

“What do you think?”

“Since I’m short, the kids at school say it’s actually LC and short for ‘lolicon’.”

“That’s some pretty obvious bullying!”

“I make sure to hit them when they do.”

“You don’t use your magic!? Then that’s fine!”

That was apparently fine. At any rate, her father held out some different meat with a knife.

“When you were born, you were really small and your mama was a mathematical witch, right? So she named you Elsie based on Alice in Wonderland. Elsie is an abbreviation of Alice, so she was making sure you could grow big even though you were small. Is that getting into the giantess genre? Well, anyway, she was also hoping you would always come home no matter what might happen.”

“Why is Elsie an abbreviation of Alice? Isn’t it just as long?”

“Do you really think I’d know when I don’t know

why we're the Hunters? Hm? Also, Alice's author was quite the pedophile, but that has nothing to do with your name so don't worry if you remember that in the future."

I won't worry, but I didn't need to know that in the first place, papa. And why are we the Hunters anyway?

Character Page 1

各務・鏡

【かがみ・かがみ】

学年：普通科三年
術式：自由自在
所属：自分自身
戦種フレーム：聖騎士系
使役体：デカ夫（竜属）
デバイス：剣窟ディカイオシュネ
特徴：長身で男装。髪は白いが僅かに色があるあたり、脱色ではなく地毛だろうと言われている。態度は常時の上から目線だが、それは口調による イメージの部分が大きく、小動物を構ったり、沿岸部の街で子供達と話したりしているときは、腰を落として視線の高さを等しくしようとするなど、気遣いがあるフシが多く観られる。

戦種フレームは聖騎士系、もはや前時代ともいえる防御重視、地上戦主体の戦種だが、彼女はそれで飛行するし、砲撃魔喰もこなす「チートですわ……」としみじみ言うのは堀之内だが、魔女は大概チートなのでよくある。

戦闘の技術は高く、全体の流れを想定した後で、その流れに沿うためのアドリブを組み込んで来る。とはいえアドリブがかなり突拍子も無いため、ついていくのは至難であろう。なお、それらの無茶やアドリブを許すのは、彼女の能力が特殊なクラフト系であることによる。何もかもを自在に出来る力は、彼女に自由を与えているのだ。

Kagami Kagami

Year: General Division Year 3

Spell Type: Whatever She Wants

Affiliation: Herself

Combat Frame: Holy Knight-style

Servant: Dikaio (Dragon)

Device: Sword-Cannon Dikaiosyne

Traits: Tall and wears men's clothing. Her hair is white but has a hint of color, so it is thought to be her natural hair and not bleached. She always looks down on others, but that mostly comes from her way of speaking. When dealing with small animals or speaking with children on the coastal part of the city, she crouches down to put herself at their eye level, so she shows a lot of concern for others.

Her Combat Frame is the Holy Knight-style. That defense-and surface-oriented style is outdated, but she uses it to fly and rush at her opponent.

Horinouchi calls that “cheating”, but witches have a tendency to cheat in the first place.

She has excellent combat skills. She predicts the overall flow of battle and then follows that flow with some adlibbing worked in. But those adlibs can be so crazy that they are hard to keep up with. Also, she can only pull off those absurd adlibs because of her special craft-style abilities. She has free use of the power to make whatever she wants out of anything.

“Do not look so surprised. For me, this is normal.”

Character Page 2

堀之内・満
【ほりのうち・みつる】

学年：普通科三年
術式：神道
所属：堀之内家
戦種フレーム：巫女系
使役体：朱雀
デバイス：弓砲朱竜胆
特徴：巫女は巨乳、一体誰が言い出したのか解らない理の一つだが、堀之内家の代表もそれに連なるようだ。ついでにいうと前ヘクセンナハトの出場者だった彼女の母もそうだったが、よく考えると十年前は人妻が魔法少女名乗って最前線に出ていたのだなぁ……これはやはり同じ人妻系だった学長含めて非常にけしからんのではないだろうか。

話を戻すと、彼女は魔女のランク四位であると同時に、四法印学院の生徒会長も兼任している。これは対外的に見たとき、いつでもまともに表に出せるのが普通科だろうということで、基本、普通科から生徒会長が選出されるのだが、彼女の場合は、ともすれば学院内で下に見られがちな普通科の存在を、そのランクと共にイメージアップしていると言えるだろう。何しろ現在の日本の神道を代表する堀之内家、使用する朱竜胆は、単体の物理攻撃力ならば上位ランカーのそれを凌ぐと言われている。どんだけ攻撃全振りなんだよ、と言われるかもしれないが、御本人曰く「単に敵を倒すことだけ考えてたらこうなっただけですの」とのことで、ある意味目的のために手段を一つも選んでない、清々しいですね。

「倒したことが無い相手に対して
手抜きは一切ありませんのよ」

Horinouchi Mitsuru

Year: General Division Year 3

Spell Type: Shinto

Affiliation: Horinouchi Family

Combat Frame: Shrine Maiden-style

Servant: Suzaku

Device: Bow-Cannon Akerindou

Traits: Shrine maidens have huge breasts. No one knows who came up with that universal law, but each consecutive representative of the Horinouchi family seems to follow it. Her mother, who was selected for the previous Hexennacht, did too, but come to think of it, a wife was standing on the front lines and calling herself a magical girl ten years ago. The headmaster was the wife-type too, so that seems highly inappropriate.

To get back on topic, she has a witch rank of 4 while also serving as Shihouin Academy's student council

president. The president is normally chosen from the general division because someone from that division can make public appearances more easily, but her rank has also improved the image of the normal division which tends to be viewed as the lowest of the divisions. After all, she is from the Horinouchi family that represents modern Japanese Shinto. Her Akerindou is said to outdo the higher rankers in pure physical attack power. You might be wondering why she is so attack-oriented, but she claims that is simply how things turned out when she focused exclusively on defeating her enemy. If you think of that as using any means necessary to achieve her goals, then it sounds very refreshing.

“I will not hold back in the slightest against an undefeated opponent.”

Character Page 3

学年：特機科三年
術式：米国式攻術
所属：米国空軍内攻術団
戦種フレーム：カラテカ系
使役体：ヘッジホッグ（ハリネズミ）
デバイス：盾砲ヘッジホッグ
特徴：外国人！　ネコミミ！　パイルバンカー！　ヘソ出し空手着！　スパッツ！　とか、何だか数え役満に大量ドラぶち込んだような塩梅だけど、これでも彼女は特機科代表であると同時に米国代表。遂に米国も未来に住むようになったということで、バックに米軍ついてるんで、下手に勝負すると相当痛い目に遭わされるのは必定である。ちなみに"攻術"は"こうじゅつ"であって"せめじゅつ"ではない。大体、攻術は女性限定なので、だったら男性限定が"うけじゅつ"になってしまうではないですか。それはいけません。表向きですが。

さて話を戻すと、彼女は魔女のランク三位。元々、米国の魔女達はそのデバイス類を機械的に構築する事で知られているが、その特性と各国魔女達の技術が集まる特機科がここに融合。使用されるヘッジホッグは米国側との連携で特殊な加速術式を用いるが、それを可能とする強度などは学院での研究をベースとした部分も大きいとされている。とはいえ本人は元々父子家庭で気楽に成長したこともあり、身体の小さい事を納得の上で、上位ランカーであることを誇りもせず、特機科の仲間達と日々不夜城となる特機科校舎の生活を楽しんでいる。

（ここまでの文責：四法印学院広報委員対外班）

Elsie Hunter

Year: Special Equipment Division Year 3

Spell Type: American Attack Spells

Affiliation: American Air Force Attack Spell Unit

Combat Frame: Karate-style

Servant: Hedgehog

Device: Shield-Cannon Hedgehog

Traits: A foreigner! Cat ears! A pile bunker! A midriff-exposing karate uniform! Spats! She feels like a Kazoe-Yakuman with a ton of Dora piled on top, but she's still the representative of both the special equipment division and the United States. The US is finally living in the future too, so with the US military backing her, anyone who carelessly challenges her is in for a rude awakening. By the way, she may use "attack spells", but that isn't the same thing as "seme spells". Besides, only girls can use attack spells, so would that make the boy-only spells "uke spells"? We can't have that. Not officially

anyway.

To get back on topic, her witch rank is 3. American witches were originally known for mechanically constructing their spells, but our special equipment division has combined that trait with the techniques of witches from other nations. Her Hedgehog uses a unique acceleration spell that requires America's assistance, but the solid structure making that possible was apparently largely based on the research carried out at the academy. Then again, she had a happy upbringing raised by her father, so she accepts how small she is, feels no pride in her high rank, and enjoys her sleepless nights in the special equipment division building with the others from that division.

(The previous text came from the external affairs team of Shihouin Academy's PR Committee.)

"I recommend watching and being amazed. You won't have time to be amazed if it hits you."

Uniform Page

Shihouin Academy General Division Uniform

About Shihouin Academy

Location	Center of Tokyo Bay
Category	Girl's Boarding School
Overview	Middle and High School (But the middle school is located elsewhere)

-rear-

Normal Division

●Origin

Shihouin Academy is a relatively new school compared to the witch training institutions of other nations, so the uniform is a new variety when viewed as a witch outfit. Its spell support and defense support surpass those of other nations.

It is based on the major ivy and sunlight textures of nature worship, so it has little character of its own yet its design is based on the sources of life. This was to help out those who are powered by a god. At the same time, those whose powers are based in darkness or death can add on extra clothing for Qliphoth support. This was to ensure that most of the students would be able to wear the uniform. If nudity is required, the ether permeation of the outer clothing can be increased to create "ether nudity", so if you see a student dressed in what is called the "bell style", that's what it is. Don't peek up from below.

The uniform's designer was Lisbeth, one of the Three Sages and a leader of U.A.H., so the uniform for the U.A.H. attack spell soldiers had those same textures sewn in at the same time. This was to improve the cooperation between the academy students and U.A.H. and to prevent a repeat of ten years ago when a failure to cooperate exacerbated the damage done.

*We asked Student Council President Horinouchi Mitsuru to model the uniform.

*The chest-accentuating stitching is optional.

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Normal Division

He who least needs tomorrow,

Will most gladly greet tomorrow

—Epicurus of Athens

Prologue: The Time is Third Period

Prologue

“The Time is Third Period”

The daytime witch hides her identity

The daytime witch hides her identity

"10:07 AM: Lightning detected in the west coast of Tokyo Bay: The lightning was reported to have 'risen'."

"Same time: Automatic doors, active elevators, and train doors malfunctioned and opened across eastern Tokyo. Fortunately, no one seems to have been injured."

"Same time: The opened doors across Tokyo malfunctioned and automatically closed. Some believe this explains the lack of accidents with the previous malfunction."

"10:12 AM: Lightning warning canceled for western coast of Tokyo Bay."

"10:17 AM: Central Tokyo Bay's Shihouin Academy is annihilating an experimental servant."

"10:21 AM: Escape of experimental servant confirmed at Central Tokyo Bay's Shihouin

Academy."

"10:30 AM: Requesting pursuit and inspection of experimental servant at Central Tokyo Bay's Shihouin Academy."

<The request was sent to...>

"The lightning warning was canceled, but is that what allowed the servant to escape?"

There was no wind underground, so it seemed terribly boring.

Instead, she had to brush a hand through her hair, but it did not flutter much in the air conditioning. It was black hair which went well with her dark green uniform. It would have looked fine with red or blue as well, though.

It was not the most individual color.

...Which does a good job of showing my position and focus.

After that thought, she spoke aloud.

“This is Horinouchi Mitsuru, Private Shihouin Academy’s General Education Rank 1 and Overall Rank 4 and representative of the Horinouchi Shrine in charge of servant management. I will now pursue Servant Experiment Registration Number JDPH-a707.”

She took a breath and started by looking up at the large white ceiling.

She was in the underground spell experiment space. The ceiling was twenty meters up. The box-like room was thirty meters on each side and it felt a little cramped with all the work desks, targets, and anti-shock equipment for blunt strikes.

However, she spread her arms upwards.

“Sing, Suzaku.”

The empty air split open and a small bird flew out and to her shoulder. It was vermilion. It had an abstract appearance because it was “taking it easy”

as an information being, but this did more than enough to provide the basis for Divine Beast Suzaku.

Something spread from the girl's palms.

It was a ring of light.

It was a vermilion circular torii.

It had a diameter of five meters and it rotated and lowered while displaying something along its path.

"Expand my vision to confirm the extent of its escape. The information will converge from that state."

The whole would be made into a single unit. The scattered would be brought together. That process was necessary to trace something distant.

And the image displayed on the surrounding barrier was the color blue.

It was the external world seen from a great height.

All 360 degrees were visible, but for the "convergence", the vision was rapidly dropping.

Her vision returned to the earth where she was, but looking up into the heavens showed the blue sky.

Looking down showed a large bay with an island floating in the middle.

She could not stop her vision from dropping to that point.

The many tall structures surrounding the bay formed a great metropolis.

However, most of that city was not functioning.

It had been destroyed.

The area by the eastern bay and the northern area looked like a giant fist had struck them in places and long canyons had been carved into them. Most of those already had trees and other plants covering them and some had even filled with water to create a water source.

But there was color in the city near the bay, in the west, and in the south. There was plenty of smoke from factories and ships coming and going through

the bay.

Those areas contained life that seemed to turn its back on the destruction.

The projected vision dropped toward the island in the center of the bay.

At some point, that vision grew horizontal.

The island scenery growing up from below began with the central forest.

There were green trees and clearings. In the north was a flower garden. The forest had something like a mausoleum in the center.

A few buildings were located around it.

They formed a school.

The image displayed on the barrier provided coordinates and labels. The labels on the buildings contained the blue checkmark of a safe place.

The school buildings were labelled general education, special equipment, spell, or honors.

Buildings labelled gym, library, and cafeteria could also be seen.

“Nothing passing through the sky above Shihouin Academy’s artificial island. Nothing out of the ordinary in the surrounding areas. …Visually confirmed.”

As she spoke, her eyes moved around.

She saw something to the southeast between the school buildings located in the four cardinal directions.

It was a large white building. The building was a development laboratory for servants and equipment.

Her vision dropped inside that building.

It arrived.

“…”

It converged and connected.

She looked up and saw the cylindrical translucent

barrier showing her the outside world in every direction.

She was underground, but the aboveground projection was the same as standing on the development laboratory's roof.

The inside of the barrier had labels for cardinal direction and scale as well as the courses of the planets in the sky.

...I can't perform astrology with my spells, so it's not much use for me.

She produced a spell circle in her hand and it spread a ley line net out in every direction. The convergence of the high-altitude vision had bound a connection with all of the land she had seen.

"I will begin the pursuit now."

She brought the magic circle closer.

"Um, Horinouchi?"

The underclassman on the floor with her spoke up. The girl was in charge of examining her work here.

The girl was continuing to type on a document spell circle as she spoke.

“Are you really going to dispose of that servant when you catch it?”

“Yes, its power is too great, so no one can control it at the moment. In fact, the power leaking from the servant could destroy nearby people’s spells.”

She lowered her vision.

She saw a plain wood box fixed to a stretcher. Its automatic Hakone-style lock was opened and it contained tangible pale light.

It was a small creature.

It was a dragon.

The girl named Horinouchi looked to the thirty centimeter square wooden box.

The dragon inside was only about fifteen centimeters tall.

Its blue and white was surprisingly matte. It was made not to show up much even under illumination spells.

Its obedience despite understanding the situation showed how well-made it was.

However, this was not the real thing.

A small ring of light circled the outside of the box.

This was a circular torii emblem. It pressurized ether readings. It was meant to forcibly amplify the afterimage left by ether components.

“The temporary ley line convergence has successfully reproduced JDPH-a707’s afterimage from the pressurized ley line vibration afterimage. The only question is what to do about this thing.”

The dragon child was scattering light form its entire body.

...Even if it’s found, handling it barehanded would be dangerous.

The light was ether light and ether was the

foundational element of all things and the fuel of all spells.

“If it can emit this much ether, even our top class students won’t be able to handle it. And if it has escaped…”

“Was it that lightning? I hear UAH sent out a warning. There was a bit of a commotion when all of the school’s doors opened at once.”

“What did the teachers say?”

“That the lightning caused an error in UAH’s defense system that controls all of eastern Tokyo. That may have cast an ‘open’ spell on the entire area.”

“This was more than just opening.”

Horinouchi recalled a certain scene.

“When I went to check on the faculty room, the instant coffee’s lid was open too.”

“Well…”

“This wasn’t the door system that handles the opening spells. It looked more like everything that can open was forcibly opened.”

“Is that even possible? Well, um, I know that’s how spells are, but it covered all of eastern Tokyo and even interfered with our school and UAH that have anti-spell defenses.”

“I was saying it with a fair bit of disbelief, you

know?”

“Ah,” said the underclassmen when she finally realized what Horinouchi meant.

She smiled bitterly.

“To do that would require phenomenon level interference over the entire region, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, it would. But UAH is probably investigating and our job is to confirm our pursuit information.”

“But,” said the other girl. “Will you really dispose of it when you catch it?”

“Yes. It would take a very powerful spell-user to fully control it.”

The girl immediately replied.

“Horinouchi, aren’t you powerful enough to-…”

“I already have Suzaku. And the three above me have their own as well.”

“But…”

“It’s a shame after being involved from the

beginning of production, isn't it?"

But, she thought to crush the other girl's words. She almost seemed to be trying to convince herself.

...What if my mother was here?

That great existence had left the Suzaku with her, but she was gone now.

So there was no other option here.

But, she thought again. *Is that really true?*

After a bit of thought, she opened her mouth.

"Most likely..."

She tried to change her train of thought.

When faced with a harsh fact, it was easy to use regulations as a shield to convince herself. There were exceptions like this, but she had to get herself moving regardless of whether she liked it or not.

This was just an odd whim.

Would this underclassman say it was not like her?

“Most likely, Koutarou will command the retrieval team. After the retrieval is complete, I will see if there is any other solution.”

“For example…”

“Instead of disposing of it by disintegration, it could be broken down to strip away its special characteristics, leaving only the basic form. It will no longer have any use as a servant, but…”

“That’s a great idea, Horinouchi!”

Horinouchi paused briefly at the shout and grabbed hand of agreement.

…*Honestly*.

It was wrong to rejoice when an exception was supported. They could not make decisions like that all of the time.

“I have not finished yet, so it’s too soon to say whether it’s a great idea or not.”

“Oh, s-sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

Horinouchi smiled bitterly and gave her defense for making this kind of decision.

“This is an exception. There is no need to thank me.”

She held a hand over the box and activated a spell.

The ley line convergence was expanded from the traces of the dragon child.

The tracking had begun.

“I am very thankful. I truly know little of this land.”

Below the clear morning sun, someone bowed toward a police station.

It was a local station a ways into the city along the salty bay coast.

Armored vehicles with rotating blue warning lights were travelling up and down the surrounding roads.

“Well, miss, I’m just glad there hasn’t been any real trouble. Are you on your way to Shihouin?”

A police officer pressed his back against the police station's door.

If he moved at all, the door tried to open, so he lowered his shoulders in annoyance and looked to the other person.

She was a woman still young enough to be called a girl.

She was tall, had long hair, and wore a men's suit.

"Your Japanese is pretty good," said the officer. "But what country are you from?"

"Do I not look Japanese to you?"

"No Japanese is going to walk into the center of Tokyo and ask where they are. Oh, but you don't have to answer."

Another armored vehicle moved past, but the officer pointed past it with his chin. He indicated the collection of buildings on the bay's island.

"There are a lot like you in Shihouin. They

sometimes stop by here after crashing during flight training."

"I am actually from Japan, but I will be careful not to do that when I fly."

"Well, it's usually only the first years who crash. … And where in Japan are you from?"

"Yokohama."

"That's pretty close by."

"I have been in a different country for a while."

The girl produced a case from inside her suit and pulled something out of it.

"This is my license. Does it work here too?"

"Ahh, is that the one from the country you were in? It's a little different from the ones here."

"Really?"

"Yeah, well, look at this part."

The officer pulled out his own and showed it to her.

“You were part of that country’s UAH? It says brigadier general here.”

“You can read it because the writing is pure information, can you? And you are not bad yourself, marshal.”

“What country are you from? Based on the writing, I’d guess the Middle East. I heard they had it pretty bad there with what happened ten years ago.”

“No,” she said while pointing to her own name. “Kagami Kagami. People say it is a real stylish name.”

“Is that really something to point out yourself?”

“I really like it,” she said with a smile.

Just then, a bell rang.

It came from Shihouin Academy in the bay and the officer commented on it.

“Oh, it’s third period. My wife will be making her delivery to the cafeteria before long.”

“Then I should be going. I want to take a bit of a look around.”

“Oh? You’re going? Can I ask what you’re doing?”

“Looking for someone.”

“Did something happen ten years ago?”

“No, it goes back further than that. …But why do you bring up ten years ago?”

“Just how peaceful a country were you living in?”

He gave a bitter smile and Kagami shrugged.

“I will admit it was originally a horribly peaceful country filled with nothing.”

With that, she started to move. As she began to leave, she tapped on the door the officer held in place.

“What a nuisance.”

“Yeah, and take care. …Once you can fly, check in the back of the reconstructed land. There’s a croquette shop with a sign visible from above, so

make sure you stop by."

And...

"You should get to Shihouin before classes end. They're reviewing a lot and doing some exciting stuff before determining who gets to take part in the next Hexennacht. This time, they say buddies are accepted. The higher ranks are bad enough alone, so it's got to be quite the group they've got there. Maybe it's for the best to restrict witches to the young."

"I see. I will keep that in mind."

Kagami raised a hand in parting.

The bell rang again and the officer assumed she would head in that direction, but...

"Hey, that's the wrong way."

"Something is bothering me a little. I am on my way to school; this is just a shortcut of sorts."

The officer just about ran after her, but he stopped.

“Huh?”

At some point, the door had lost all power.

He heard the siren of a nearby armored vehicle and the distant and fading sound of the bell.

Third period was beginning in Shihouin Academy.

Chapter 1: Witch in the City

Chapter 1

“Witch in the City”

Bonds are made through meetings

Bonds are made through meetings

Class had already begun by the time Horinouchi returned to the classroom.

Pursuit of a servant was nothing more than determining its direction by confirming the trajectory of the ether produced as it moved. Shinto spells removed all that was unnecessary, so they made for highly accurate “pathfinding” spells.

Once it was found and captured, it would be brought back and she would begin her negotiation. But for now…

…I should put those thoughts on hold.

She faced forward.

She was inside a stepped classroom. Shihouin Academy’s general education division had around fifty students in each year.

They were few, but they were the elite. Most of

them had unique traits, so classes had a tendency to focus on general knowledge and ethics.

This was the same. At the bottom of the stepped classroom, a teacher opened a spell circle in front of a large blackboard.

“Hexennacht. You will be the stars of that night and you third years need to be especially aware of that.”

She held up the spell circle which automatically typed out her words. It was a public spell of Shihouin Academy and many of the third years had activated their own because of its efficient ether consumption.

Horinouchi was different.

She opened a vermilion circular torii that caught the teacher’s words as she thought.

…What can I do to secure my place in Hexennacht?

Suddenly, the teacher pointed at the girl next to her.

“Yes, ma’am,” said the girl as she stood up.

She glanced over at Horinouchi and gave a gesture saying “leave it to me”. Most likely, the teacher had started to point at Horinouchi but hesitated.

It was Horinouchi’s fault for getting lost in thought.

She nodded back and the neighboring girl brought a hand to her chin in a dignified pose.

“Magical girl isn’t the right answer, is it? I did want to be one, though.”

“Unfortunately, so did I,” said the teacher. “I’m a magical woman now.”

Horinouchi wanted to believe the class’s silent lack of laughter was out of consideration.

“Anyway,” said the neighboring girl. “The technical classification is a spell attack soldier from the spell branch of the military.”

“Correct. And what demographic is it composed of?”

“One hundred percent female.”

“Correct,” said the teacher again.

She smiled and waved her hand up and down to tell the girl to sit.

The girl complied and the teacher walked across the podium.

She moved left and opened a spell circle in front of the blackboard. It displayed a graph with years running left to right and numbers of people running up and down. A red line drew a rectangle, but it radically declined partway through before gradually rising and finally gaining a sudden and rapid rise.

“This is an estimate of how many ‘witches’ were present in the world over time. They were known as shamans, medicine women, and fortunetellers in ancient times. In times of uncertainty, they were hunted as scapegoats and their numbers decreased. However, they made a comeback after the Reformation when Europe developed into a large-scale battlefield. In modern times, they began in Prussia and rose to the forefront. They were even the major fighters during World Wars One and Two.

Why was that? …You there.”

A girl by the window immediately answered without standing.

“Active spells,” she said. “Both men and women can use spells, but women excel at active ones and men excel at passive ones and neither can outdo the other. So from a combat perspective, women are the attackers and men are the defenders.”

She continued quietly.

“But in modern times, we can mass-produce as many weapons and equipment as we need and servants have been developed to act as our familiars. This has led to an age where that sword and shield relationship is tilted overwhelmingly in the sword direction. Meanwhile, the shield side can gather as a group to set up barriers to protect cities and the like, so the battlefield has divided between the defended positions and the attackers who struggle over the lines between those positions. In other words, the witches have become the stars of

battle."

"Correct. This division was noticed long ago and the witch hunts were secretly fueled by fears that the existing patriarchal society would lose its power. In the end, the nations that sent their women to the front lines of the battlefield had a drastic reduction in population, so after the initial stages, most wars get bogged down in a struggle to find a way to send one's defensive line of men into the enemy nation."

The teacher was not done.

"But you all know why wars like that only ever exist for a short time, don't you?"

Because...

"Hexennacht occurs once every ten years. And ever since the Middle Ages, mankind has worked to resist it."

A servant was an artificial spirit.

Despite only just having gone outside for the first

time, the dragon child knew the outside world.

It was fifteen centimeters tall. It could fly, but flying had brought pursuit earlier. Even if it was artificial, it inherited the instincts of the creature it was based on. It was certain that being pursued would lead to its demise, so it immediately chose to hide.

It was currently east of Heiwajima in Ota. It was behind a shopping district off the main road.

It had knowledge of the land, the time, and the language. It was aware it was meant to support someone, but it also knew it could not do so in this situation.

It was in danger.

...A failure.

It understood that too.

It could analyze its own abilities on the level of instinct. It had been created for Hexennacht with an absolute focus on ether extraction ability.

But that extraction was too powerful. In what

seemed like a freak accident, the pathways had joined together and its output was far greater than estimated.

The temporary acclaim had quickly changed to disappointment.

It had been decided that no spell user could contain the amount of ether the dragon child extracted. There had apparently been negotiations with some skilled witches, but they all already had a similar existence.

It had been created by accident, so parts of it were uncontrollable.

They had taken data on it, so they could apparently reproduce something similar that they could control. In other words, it was not needed.

It understood the idea of self-destruction.

That was something all servants had an instinctive understanding of.

It was meant to support someone, so it would be

eliminated if that was not possible. It did not resist or question that fact.

Thinking that was simply how things were, it sat still and the door opened.

It was opened by someone.

The dragon child did not know who, but someone had opened the door to this room inside of which it should have entered eternal sleep.

It then recalled something. When it had been revealed to be a failure, someone had placed it on their hand and said the following: “Probably the only person who could become your master would be someone with an unbelievably large ether pool. Or…”

It did not know the rest, but it had an idea as the door opened.

Should it…

…Search for someone like that?

It had heard no one like that existed, but the person

who had put it on their hand had seemed disappointed. The ability to read emotion like that was another ability supplied on the instinct level.

So as it reached its front legs toward the door, it had another thought.

If it found someone like that, no one would have to be disappointed.

As a servant, gaining a master was the first and most meaningful thing it could do.

"..."

The door was opened. It led outside. It led to everything.

The dragon child had knowledge of the outside world. That knowledge had already been there at its birth. Why was that there? It could not use the knowledge if it slept.

So it moved outside. It could not let itself be caught. Being caught would lead to "disappointment".

"I see."

It heard a sudden voice from behind.

There had been nothing there before, but…

“So there is something like you here. How interesting.”

After the voice, the dragon child was suddenly lifted up from below its front legs.

The servant dragon child looked at the girl who had picked it up.

She wore a men’s suit yet she was not a man. But…

…*Wrong.*

It could see the ether light surrounding her. In the darkness of this back alley, this may have been the first light that the servant saw.

Some kind of powerful divine protection or spell had washed over or passed through her, but…

“…?”

Something was wrong.

What was “wrong”? Her power was.

Servants possessed a certain ability in their support role: to fully view someone’s power.

But what this dragon child sensed in the girl was not like any of the others it had seen.

...Not there.

Her ether pool was thin. She was a normal person with no training as a witch. Her ability was much lower than the average for a child. It might as well have been zero.

So this was the wrong person.

This person could not use spells and supporting her would put her in danger.

She would be unable to contain the overflowing ether which could even kill her.

“...”

So the dragon child shook its body to say it was too dangerous.

“Sorry. Do you want me to put you down?”

She readily lowered it to the ground.

She was kind.

It looked up in surprise for a number of reasons and saw her kneeling down.

“Wonderful. Just how rich is this world to produce such an unexpected being?”

And…

“I am thankful for your existence.”

It did not understand. It was a “failure”, so why was it being thanked?

At any rate, what was it to do? It had struggled and been released, so how was it to react now that it had been thanked? It did not contain the proper knowledge to decide.

However, it heard something. It was an armored vehicle. Specifically, a Type 23 Six-Wheel APC from the UAHJ Shihouin Branch. Its anti-spell defenses

were effective up to Rank 3, but its greatest ability was its transportation ability.

“You!”

The front door opened and a young man in a suit hopped out. He opened an identification spell circle as he did.

“I am Amagi Koutarou, Division 2 Sub-Manager of the UAHJ Shihouin Branch. I want you to step away from that servant and give it to us! Do you understand!?”

While still crouched down, Kagami heard a group of footsteps lining up behind the man named Koutarou.

...Quite the show of force.

The “servant” was likely the dragon looking up at her. If it was a servant, what did it serve?

“Is there something wrong with this thing? It does not look dangerous to me.”

“Regulation of that unit failed. It cannot control its power and could even kill the user. It is in an extremely dangerous state and…”

…Oh, that kind of servant.

In other words, it was a familiar. Or perhaps it could be called a pressurizer.

She asked one thing.

“What happens after I hand it over to you?”

The bespectacled young man breathed in before finally giving a clear answer.

“It will of course be broken down in the regulatory facility as is the standard-…”

“It will not.”

“What?”

Kagami ignored him and looked down.

The dragon child was looking up at her there.

“Go,” she told it. “Go and live. If you were born, then that is worth doing. And if you think you should

release your power, then come to me. ...I am the type that does not die easily."

The dragon child hesitated before lowering its head. It may have been a nod or a bow, but it was a clever creature either way. It was wonderful.

But what was she to do now?

"Are you going to let it escape!?"

"What are you going to do?"

The men lined up in front of her. They wore helmets, ballistic armor that hid their bodies, and backpacks.

"It would be a lot of trouble if you got in our way."

The young man frowned as he viewed her through a spell window. The glowing magic circle was a type of console and seemed to be a local technique.

"Where are you registered?"

"Oh? Do I have to be registered somewhere?"

"You can't just throw out a custom dating back more

than a century ago!”

He suddenly looked up into the sky and inhaled.

“It is unlikely, but it is possible you are also a troublesome existence. Are you aware of that?”

“I am, but I would rather not make that decision just yet,” said Kagami. “But you are in no position to answer that with a clear ‘yes’. And neither am I.”

“Then I apologize. …We will be acting at my discretion here.” He raised a hand. “I authorize the use of anti-witch equipment!”

“Listen, everyone.”

The teacher raised her right hand, raised her fingers one by one, and then lowered them.

“Ten. Ten years.”

That was…

“We are approaching Hexennacht which occurs once every ten years. The spell attack soldiers are

known as ‘witches’ and that name provides divine protection inherited from the past.”

The teacher smiled a little.

“I’m sorry to say it, but there is no equivalent term for males. But just as the military usually refers to theirs as a defensive occupation, their spells are mostly passive ones such as poison fighting or anti-spell. They can also act on their own during Hexennacht just like we can. ...But their objective will be defense, so they end up staying behind. And we have had some success developing defensive spells by researching reactive defense using attack spells, so there is no need to bring them to the front lines at all.”

She reopened her closed hand and pointed at a girl by the hallway.

“However, there is one thing we must be careful about concerning the difference between the men and us. Do you know what that is?”

“Yes.” The girl stood up. “Should I show you?”

“No, this is just confirming what we all already know.”

“In that case…”

The girl’s shoulders relaxed and the slight tension left the other girls as well.

As that stiffness became relief, the girl spoke.

“The men can create self-defense divine protection on their own, but in exchange, there is one thing they can’t use.”

That was…

“Servants. A witch’s familiar. The very first servant ever created was ‘made for witches’ and all modern servants are its descendants, so only witches can use them. But the successful creation of pseudo-spirits allows the men to summon weapons.”

“Such as?”

The teacher looked across the students.

They all gathered strength in their hands and

reached for their necklaces or other decorations.

“Summon frames. Men can’t use servants or attack spells, so the most they can manage are Normal Devices. And when summoning them, they use a pseudo-servant known as a public servant.”

Kagami saw it happen.

On the top right side of the men’s backpacks, an upwards-facing launcher burst open and light shot out.

It was white light.

It was not a bullet, lightning, or even fire. It simply stopped in midair to protect each of them individually.

“Spirits? They look artificial, though.”

“This is one part of IAHJ’s male anti-witch equipment. It’s what you call defensive attack power.”

As the man spoke, the light vanished and appeared again. Once the light spirit on his shoulders trembled and scattered, it changed to a different form.

...Oh.

It was a weapon.

The light first formed an internal structure to secure its functionality. By the time Kagami recognized it as a "cannon", it had already finished transforming and the bolts made of its own light fixed it all together.

The final form was over three meters long. It was a giant jitte cannon made of light.

"A weapon for subduing. Is that your defensive attack method?"

"They may be for men, but we have sixteen subduing Normal Devices here. A non-ranker will be injured. I personally hope you will run."

"I must brazenly make my way to that school."

"Are you a witch, too?"

“I do not know.”

But Kagami could say something else.

The technology she had just seen was very interesting. High-density ether was given individuality as a spirit and that was used to summon a weapon. Not only did that reduce the burden on the spell user, but it refined and settled the weapon’s functionality.

“I see. So…”

In her case…

“You do it like this?”

As she stood, she spread and swung her right arm.

She produced her version there.

Koutarou saw something unbelievable.

He was fifteen meters away and what he saw was far too strange for a back alley. After all, this girl…

“You summoned a Normal Device without a

servant!?”

“Hm. …Is that what it is called? But…”

She was perfectly calm as she produced a spiral of ether around her hand. A weapon made of ether was produced there and she turned to face Koutarou.

“This is how you do it, right?”

He knew why the other men were gasping.

She was rapidly constructing a large white sword. However, the central structure was made first and stored away. It was wrapped with a forceful blade that made it more of a blunt weapon than a sword, but inside…

“Sub-manager! That’s a shell-producing acceleration cannon!”

It was also on a huge scale. From pommel to tip, it was over five meters long. If she could create something like that almost instantly…

…She’s on the level of a ranker. And a high one at that!

He made a single decision. If a witch of this level was unregistered…

“Get ready, everyone! Open your defense spells to maximum!”

This was dangerous. After all…

…Only one person in this world can produce a Normal Device without a servant!

Faced with that dangerous opponent, Koutarou cried out.

“Attack! Subdue her!”

The class had become a sort of recreation.

After going over the basics, the teacher's shoulders relaxed and she spoke.

"On the night of Hexennacht, a male defense unit will defend the surface while we intercept in the air. After last time and the time before that, we know they can ignore the Hexennacht territory and the buddy system has been allowed this time around. But not only can we not ignore the excess firepower that brings, it will actually cause even more damage to the surface."

So...

"When you return home, the look in your eyes when you face your parents will change. If you spent enough time training here, you will truly understand the meaning of ten years ago or twenty years ago."

The teacher spoke with a smile, but someone raised their hand with an "um".

The student tensed her shoulders and spoke.

“My father can endure fights with my mom without using a frame. Is that some kind of divine protection?”

“That is your mother showing her love by holding back.”

They laughed and the general atmosphere softened.

But at that point, they all stopped moving.

The color vermilion had appeared in the center of the classroom.

It was a circular torii spell circle with the word “warning” in the center.

“Horinouchi.”

Horinouchi stood silently at the teacher’s call.

She spoke to no one in particular.

“I have official business to take care of.”

“That’s the second time today. …Getting too emotionally involved will prevent you from making good decisions, you know?”

“Don’t worry. This has nothing to do with emotion. …You may remember our visit to the faculty room after the lightning earlier, but the three rankers above me are not exactly prompt.”

“I see. Then you have permission to head out,” said the teacher. “You are #4 in UAH’s world witch rankings, you are a single unit ‘shrine maiden’-style witch, and you are the daughter of Horinouchi Mitsuyo, one of the three sages and participator in the previous Hexennacht. Keep that in mind when deciding how to act, Horinouchi Mitsuru.”

She smiled before continuing.

“This may just get you worked up, but Hexennacht is near. It isn’t long until that night when we must defeat the Black Witch who will destroy the world.”

Chapter 2: The Two Meet

Chapter 2

“The Two Meet”

“Men, we’re allowed to legally touch her!”
“Commander, she’s allowed to illegally fight back!”

“Men, we’re allowed to legally touch her!”

“Commander, she’s allowed to illegally fight back!”

In Kagami’s mind, combat was no easy task.

To fight, one needed the appropriate skills such as decision-making and a powerful build. On top of that, one had to train and train some more.

After that, one needed equipment, to maintain that equipment, to learn how to use it, and to continue training with it.

But after spending years of effort and lots of money, one would earn one of two things: victory or defeat. One wrong step and death was even possible.

...The risk is great.

However, there was occasionally reason enough to take on that risk.

“Peace and safety. The acquisition and preservation thereof. Does your attempt to eliminate me come

from that desire for stability? …Most notably from the preservation of order, I would assume.”

Her question was answered with sparks.

Armored men stood before her. About half of them had collapsed, but the remaining ones were quite skilled.

Even now, they were attacking her with giant jitte-shaped weapons.

“Who the hell are you!?”

“I believe I already named myself. But I am new to this place.”

And…

“You are attempting to capture a small creature and you are attacking a newcomer. I too feel a desire to play with an adorable little life when I come across one, so I am not about to hand it over. Is that not how you feel?”

“Is this any time for that!?”

“It is!!” declared Kagami. “I was showing my love for this small animal, but you suddenly attacked us! So you have an obligation to answer my questions about small animals!”

“That’s-…”

“Do you like small animals?” asked Kagami even as the attacks sent sparks flying from the giant sword in her hands. “Aren’t dogs, cats, and even rodents great? Cats are especially ideal. You know the wonderful feeling when you crouch down in front of them and they interact with you, don’t you?”

“D-dammit! So what if I do!?”

“Then,” she said. “I saw it in the newspaper, but it seems people have started playing with their cats by creating frames on the floor for them to climb inside.”

“So what!? I’ve never done that!”

“That is not what I was trying to say.”

Their weapons were locked together and Kagami

lightly pulled hers back and spoke quietly.

“When the cat refuses to enter the frame, you feel like picking it up and putting it inside yourself, but that would just be rude, wouldn’t it?”

“Kh!”

“And when small animals do what we want, we sometimes count it as our own accomplishment. … That is wrong, isn’t it?”

“W-what does that-…”

He never managed to get out the word “matter”.

His weapon burst into scattering light.

In that instant, his servant was tossed into the space his weapon had occupied.

It was a light spirit. The small ball was immediately returned to the spell circle that was rotating in midair. Kagami’s sword had been locked with that man’s weapon, but that weapon was gone now.

“I see.”

Kagami spoke as she swung her own weapon through.

“Your weapons are an alternate use of those things you call servants, but as weapons, they are based on your own belief. When faced with a contradiction, they cannot maintain their form.”

She made a slashing strike. Except this was a sword with a cannon encased inside. The first shot embedded in her opponent’s armor and destroyed it as he was sent flying back.

...I have to avoid slamming them into the ground.

She had no intention of killing them.

She had no intention of losing them.

There was another opponent who would force her hand as far as that was concerned.

But for now...

“Let me ask.”

Kagami watched her opponents’ movements. They

quickly stepped forward to suppress her in waves, so she continued attacking as she asked a question.

Kagami held her five meter sword and observed the approaching enemies.

“These are made of ether. They use a servant and they take training, knowledge, and – most importantly – belief to use. Their biggest advantage is…”

She looked to her enemy and their three meter weapons created with the same system. No, her own weapon had simply been created by copying how their weapons had been ejected and given form.

She smiled a bit when she saw no waver in their attack stances.

…Well done.

They were a well-regulated organization. Not only were the soldiers this well-trained, but…

“The biggest advantage of these weapons is that

they can be preserved as long as the spell user's belief is not broken, their life is not ended, and their ether supply is not cut off. And since they are an embodiment of a spell, their ammunition never needs to be resupplied as long as the ether is maintained. These are a type of invincible weapon."

The enemy arrived. The three in the lead slammed their jitte-shaped weapons against her.

They came from either side, above, and below. A mid-level jab came from directly ahead. None of them left their jitte sword-breakers level. Each individual attacked with a height difference.

They created a wall.

The key to it all was the one in the center. His jab arrived soonest.

Whether she moved up, down, left, or right to avoid it, the other jitte strikes would reach her.

The only way to stop this charge was to take out that central man, but that was not easy when he was

hidden by a three meter weapon.

The three men were working together quite well. And…

…To the left and right as well.

Two similar groups were rushing in to surround her.

Behind those groups of three, Kagami saw the remaining men gliding along low to the ground and raising their jitte as shields. Rectangular spell circles taller than the jitte stood out from their surface and had the word "defense" written inside them.

Kagami guessed they were determined to prevent any damage from escaping this battle.

In that case…

"What is the meaning of this?"

She moved forward.

The central jab arrived ahead of the left and right jitte strikes, but she did not care.

She held her sword horizontally and dropped it

down from the hilt.

Before the diagonally lowered sword's pommel hit the ground, she stepped on it with the heel of her boot.

"What are all of you doing?"

The sword stood up diagonally and the tip tore into the jabbing jitte from below.

It hit the bottom of the sword-breaker portion. The thick blade struck it and sent a steel sound racing out.

It hit and broke it.

The jitte was not cut, scraped, or severed. It was simply broken. The sword-breaker portion came off at the base, leaving the jitte in two pieces.

A metallic sound rang out and the light spirit vanished into the spell circle.

A moment later, Kagami's sword reached the armored uniform of the man wielding the jabbing jitte.

The sword's pommel dug into the ground and the tip drilled into his chest armor from below, just like a pike. The fibers woven below the armor's hardened plastic snapped and the armor broke. His decelerated body collided with the thick blade.

"...!"

His body was tossed upwards because Kagami had kicked up the pommel from below.

The hilt rose, making the sword horizontal once more, and she thrust the large sword forward. The width of the blade was thicker than the jitte coming in through the center, but...

...This is enough space to escape the attacks on the left and right!

Kagami stepped forward as if pulled on by the sword.

She made it through.

Men in armored uniforms swung their jitte on either side of her. She swung her large sword backwards

and spun it around to face the gap between them.

“Fire.”

If this weapon operated on one’s belief, she knew her thoughts would be able to reach it.

She immediately heard mechanical sounds coming from her hands.

The movement was slow, so she decided she had not quite gotten the hang of using this equipment. At the moment, the sword began to transform, the blade split down the center, and…

“The main cannon has appeared, has it?”

Just as she passed the enemy, she fired the cannon backwards.

…She’s even created a firing form!?

Koutarou, the young man leading the men in armored uniforms, saw the girl’s shellfire from head on.

He heard a tremendous noise and light seemed to explode outward.

However…

“A blank!?”

It had been a powerful blast. The defense team’s defense barriers had their surfaces washed away and had to regain their light, so the attack was on the level of a ranker. However…

“_ _ _ _”

The blank explosion blew away the two who had passed her by on either side.

They had been in the middle of swinging their jitte. They had likely intended to move forward and avoid any follow-up attacks while rotating their jitte around into a defensive stance.

However, the girl had not overlooked that.

She had attacked their backs. And instead of firing a shell, she had used a compression cannon that primarily fired a shockwave.

Koutarou doubted she was unable to create a shell. She had simply lowered the front-end acceleration inside the acceleration barrel and slammed a high-speed "explosion" at them from behind.

A shell would have been better.

With a shell, she would have had to target one or the other of them. The explosive blast when it was fired may have shaken the other, but that would have been angled away instead of a direct hit.

However, a targeted blank blast was very bad. As for how it was bad...

"Left and right, spread out!"

The explosive blast sent their own jitte slamming into them and the two of them flew through the air. Their speed was already past the limits of their armor's hardening mechanism. Unable to control it, they were tossed helplessly through the air.

And they ended up colliding with the two groups trying to surround the girl on the left and right.

“Dammit!” shouted someone from the right group. “I was getting excited surrounding an unknown witch, but all I get is a guy thrown at me!?”

Meanwhile, the guy in question collided with three men who caught him. The sound of armor striking armor was surprisingly light and the same pattern occurred on both sides.

“Spread out!”

The three who caught the airborne man moved in unison to leave the center.

Koutarou immediately saw the group on the right knocked flying.

It happened in an instant.

The girl named Kagami had charged straight into that group.

She had followed the path of the flying man, but something was not right about her immediate reaction.

...Does that blank cannon not have recoil!?

Koutarou had already seen the answer to his question.

The sword had jumped backwards from the cannon blast, but she had held it in both hands and pressed it against her right shoulder.

“There.”

And she had swung it around.

She had used the recoil for a large rotating swing. She had spun like a top on one heel, but she had also leaned backwards for a splendid horizontal swing.

“Is that where you are?” she had asked while adding direction to the swing.

She had planted her other heel to transform her rotation into a charge. As her sword tore through the air, it had accurately followed the soldier who flew to the right.

The problem was the three who had tried to catch that man.

The girl had accurately sent her sword in directly

below him, so they briefly hesitated.

That turned out to be a mistake.

The sword's speed allowed it to slip below him as he flew.

The thick tip struck the man in the center. He gave up on catching his fellow soldier and held his jitte up to guard.

Koutarou heard two low sounds resembling wind instruments.

The sword's tip pierced the jitte.

It passed through his guard and knocked him backwards. A moment later, Koutarou saw the sword perform a vertical half-rotation.

It opened up for a cannon blast and the mechanism reconfigured itself faster than before.

"Spread out!"

The blank cannon fired as if helping them obey his command.

The men on the left and right were blown away and the airborne man fell head-first.

"...!"

However, he flipped around and managed to plant his feet on the ground, even if he was leaning back quite a bit.

By that time, the arc of light had already drawn a large ring. Just like before, the sword flew in a splendid horizontal swing.

Her new target was the left group.

She transferred her rotation into an attack, a great sound of impact pounded into Koutarou's ears, and he heard a voice.

It belonged to the girl going by the name Kagami Kagami.

"What is the meaning of this?"

Even as she attacked and swept them away, she asked about the battle itself rather than them.

“Why do you need this kind of equipment!?”

Kagami asked her question while sweeping away the enemy, competing with them, and pushing them back.

“This equipment can be reproduced with ether, it can be carried around without worrying about its weight or volume, and it requires no refueling or reloading as long as you maintain your belief and have ether.”

What would something like that lead to?

“If there was a war, it could easily destroy a nation, if not the entire world.”

But…

“But from the looks of this city, you live in peace. The people are kind and filled with life. …That is a contradiction.”

She moved forward as she spoke.

“So I ask you.”

Kagami Kagami asked her question while striking the enemy before her and opening a path.

“What are you all so afraid of?”

She swung her weapon, fired it, and asked.

“You have this powerful equipment and you are protecting this city and its people. So why are you weaponizing small lives and keeping them ready for combat?”

Why?

“What fills you with such fear and need for protection!?”

Koutarou wondered what this witch was.

Should he call her ignorant or foolish?

How could she ask why they had developed these weapons and why they worked with the witches to protect the world?

“You can see the answer all around you.”

Yet she was saying she did not understand.

However, her question was related to their “normal” everyday life, so he felt it had to be the truth.

“Commander!”

Koutarou saw the men taking defensive stances in front of him raise their hips while leaning forward.

“We just received an order to evacuate this area!”

Evacuate.

Koutarou understood what that meant: they could not win here.

...A witch just has so much more attack power than a male spell user!

Female spells were active ones that specialized in attack and repelling.

Male spells were passive ones that specialized in defense and buffering.

Most importantly, the active spells allowed girls to interact with servants.

Modern times had introduced artificial servants and the performance of male defense spells had vastly improved, but…

“That girl is at ranker level! I don’t understand how she could eject just a Normal Device without a servant and then swing it around like that, but she definitely has the ability needed to produce a Normal Form and complete a full Frame!”

“But we should still be able to restrain her when working together.”

The rest of the team lifted the corners of their mouth.

“I forgot to mention it, but we might need to add the word ‘top’ in front of ‘ranker’. Besides…”

The man activated several spells along with the others and switched his armor’s mobile functions to high-speed combat mode. He used his fingers to hit

the “allow” button on a few spell circles.

“Look around you. That girl is fighting us, but she hasn’t done anything that would kill us. Really, she’s just been leading us around.”

“I understand that she has no hostility toward us. However, I have deemed her dangerous because she opposes our regulations for handling servants and she has produced a Normal Device without a servant.”

And if she did not want any further damage to result from this battle…

“She understands we are only fighting due to the obligations of our position.”

“Do you know why she’s fighting?”

He did.

“Her question.”

While clashing with their unit, she had expressed her anger toward how they were fighting here. That was likely her reason to fight.

They did not understand why she was fighting and she did not understand why they were fighting.

She had asked them, but...

“We cannot truly answer that question.”

“Then what do we do?”

“We endure. Classes are still in session. This is a time of day when any question is sure to receive an answer.”

So...

“An answerer is sure to arrive. A top ranker witch will arrive to answer her question.”

“Then,” said the others.

They all stepped back and put some distance between themselves and the non-standard witch named Kagami.

They held their jitte vertically and activated spell circles to reestablish their reinforcement spells.

“Who do you think is stronger? Her or our young

lady?”

“The young lady has no reason to lose.”

“Then,” said the others again. “Is it our job to test that!?”

“It is!”

Koutarou swung his hand.

He spoke to Kagami who held her sword in a lowered position while surrounded.

“Listen!”

He did not entirely understand his opponent, the situation, or the escaped servant.

However, he felt a strange emotion deep in his gut.

...This opponent.

If she would question the most obvious facts of their situation...

...Will she act as a powerful medicine against all of our problems?

“We have no obligation and no right to answer your question.”

“Does that mean someone else can answer it?”

“It does,” he said. “But you are dangerous and we do not understand your strength. So if someone is coming to answer you, it will be the one ranked 4th in the world.”

“Let me say that I am prepared to open the way forward on my own.” Kagami then smiled slightly. “My reason for fighting has finally gotten through to you, has it?”

She took a single step forward and then a second. The man in front of Koutarou reacted by giving the hand signal for “fall back”.

Koutarou was to arrange to have the area evacuated.

He was worried about the others, but all of them lifted the corners of their mouths.

“C’mon, let’s do this. We’re a decent enough challenge for a double-digit ranker.”

“But only when we’re working as a group and only when they’re alone and limited to the ground.”

“Still, we can achieve measurable results.”

“We’re the world’s barrier,” said one.

“Yeah,” said another. “We won’t let her through. And if she can, then we’ll accept her.”

“That’s right,” said a third. “And if she gets past us, it would have to be above. …I wish she was wearing a skirt, but I’m not about to criticize a girl’s fashion.”

“Sorry about that,” said Kagami in her pantsuit and shoes.

She nodded and began moving with a light step.

“I am counting on you, gentlemen.”

She raised her weapon.

“And I am thankful.”

Everyone saw a small light in the western sky out the window.

They sat inside a stepped classroom with a high ceiling.

The girls' turned to the oblong window and some scanned the scene with spell circles. Clapping hands reached them from the teacher's podium.

"Everyone, we have been falling behind lately, so try to pay attention. Even if Shihouin Academy is meant to instruct witches, it's still a high school. If you fall behind in your lessons, I'll get in trouble and you won't be prepared for your written and practical exams."

Some people replied "yes, ma'am" and others silently obeyed and focused on the teacher again.

However, one girl raised her hand.

"Um, will they be okay?"

"Just now, a notification was sent out that a location-undesignated S-rank battle has begun in the corresponding area," quietly replied the teacher. "The people have been evacuated and it seems the

cause is being guided to an external area of ruins. This is not a problem."

"No," said the girl who had raised her hand. "Um, I was talking about the opponent."

"The opponent is probably a stray witch," said someone else. "Powerful unregistered witches are usually scouted by U.A.H. or the school. But when Horinouchi is sent out..."

Everyone reached a single conclusion.

"They tend to be disciplined in some flashy way."

The teacher could only nod in agreement. She pushed up her glasses and finally opened her mouth.

"What's wrong with that?"

A light appeared in the western sky as she spoke.

"No matter how strong or harsh they may be, our history and destiny suggest it isn't enough."

By the time Horinouchi arrived at the scene, it was

filled with wreckage and the wind blew about scattered ether light.

These were ruins.

If one travelled a little northeast along the coast of the bay, one would arrive at modern ruins even along the rivers.

Horinouchi found several familiar faces collapsed at the entrance to such a place.

“Everyone!”

They were on a wide road. Long ago, it had apparently continued even further west.

Men wearing shattered armored uniforms stood on either side of the road.

Horinouchi had received a report on her way here and the individual described therein spoke up.

“Oh? A new challenger?”

Instead of simply wearing a suit, the girl’s clothes had a tight style reminiscent of riding clothes. She

turned toward Horinouchi.

“That movement was quite sudden. Was it an Instant Step?”

She had seen through it.

However, Horinouchi had not let that show in the moment of her arrival. So was this girl bluffing? Or…

…Did she see the ether movement of a mobility spell?

To make extra certain her approach would not be detected, Horinouchi had travelled the last distance on foot. However, this girl had detected in a way she had not imagined.

“Who are you?”

“Is there something odd about me?”

Horinouchi glared at her and raised her right hand to point.

“That.”

The girl noticed the pure white Normal Device she held.

It was a large sword. According to the report, it could fire a cannon built inside it.

However, Horinouchi noticed something strange now that she had seen it for herself.

“That Normal Device.”

“Those guys were making a fuss over it too, but is summoning this thing really so strange? I think they said something about needing a servant to do it.”

Something seemed off about the girl’s comment, but Horinouchi was mostly mildly irritated by it.

...This is odd.

She knew what the girl was saying, but she could not understand it.

She did not know what the girl meant by it.

She was saying she had summoned a Normal Device without a servant, but that made no sense. That was not how summoning a Normal Device worked.

So...

“Suzaku.”

A small red bird appeared on her right shoulder. It was an information entity. It had a highly simplified form to avoid exhausting itself, but as a spirit, it still corresponded to the Suzaku of the Four Divine Beasts.

It was the guardian deity of the Horinouchi Shrine that she managed and it had lived there since ancient times.

The Suzaku was puffing its chest out proudly. The bird was usually the cool type that did little to assert its presence, but it seemed to be in high spirits today. In that case…

“Let’s go.”

“This is all happening so suddenly again.”

There was no point in responding to the girl. The girl had destroyed one of the defense units that were essentially under her direct control. They could defeat a double-digit ranker, but they had been

utterly devastated here. And if none of them were badly injured…

…She's equal to a high level ranker!

But was it possible for someone this skilled to exist outside the organization at a time like this?

…Based on what I can see here, it must be true.

That thought made her tremble.

She had no choice but to accept reality. Whether it was painful, unreasonable, a great division, or anything else, it was happening before her eyes. So…

"Summon Normal Frame!"

Chapter 3: Fly Through the Sky

Chapter 3

“Fly Through the Sky”

A spell that absorbs power
Is a witch’s technique

A spell that absorbs power

Is a witch's technique

Kagami felt her skin tremble at the girl who had appeared before her.

The ether and the ley lines were taking that girl's side. She could instinctually tell that the foundations of the world were obeying the other girl more than her. And she knew what system one used to make all forces obey them.

"A spell!"

People made those so the world would obey them.

A power greater than the weapon Kagami held raced around the girl.

It was light.

Several spell circles opened inside it. They were vermilion. Several words scrolled across the circular display decorated with maple leaves and the red

bird on the girl's shoulder gave a single cry.

"...!"

The bird vanished into the light.

The ringing of a bell filled the air. But instead of the light jingle of a small bell, this was the clanking of a large metal bell at a Shinto shrine. The ringing spread out as if setting up a barrier of sound and the girl spread her arms in the center.

A moment later, she brought her hands together in front of her.

A solid clap left them.

In an instant, her clothes scattered into the sound. But by the time they did, spell circles enveloped her to the point of hiding her body.

"＿＿＿"

After another clap, small collections of mechanical components appeared on different parts of the girl's body.

Kagami guessed they were engines made of ether.

She was right.

The engines consumed ether to spin and they accelerated the ley lines that supported her. The spiraling light was pressurized and it wrapped around her body.

“Oh? You can construct armor and reinforced engines too? That is a splendid mental presentation.”

The girl created heavy armor and clothing. An especially solid part was ejected from the legs to assist in flight and as a point of support when wielding a large weapon.

The engines were contained inside and it was all powered by ether. Thousands of bolts made of ether were ejected into the air and they drove into each part of her equipment to hold it in place.

The sound reverberated outward.

Kagami did not overlook the single spell circle that

opened in the center as if to be stored in the girl's chest.

It contained a heart-shaped indicator and it was likely the central system for her ether equipment.

Kagami managed to read the mirror-image writing in the spell circle.

It said "Phlogiston Heart System".

"I see."

The ringing of the bell began to fade and the wall of light thinned. A girl wielding a massive bowgun was revealed just about to leave the barrier.

On her upper body, the clothing stood out more than the armor, but the giant arms and legs were meant for swift and heavy combat.

She slowly raised her head and looked toward Kagami.

Sensing that the battle would begin soon, Kagami breathed in.

“I see.”

A realization came to her.

She had been mistaken about something.

She had been right in assuming the sword she held was the primary form of weapons in this world, but…

…It is large and it has a way of swinging you around.

She had assumed they had some system for lightening their weapons, but that was wrong.

“So you’re meant to swing these things around only after creating an armored outfit and reinforced engines out of ether like you just did.”

And at the center of it all was the spell circle contained inside the girl’s chest armor.

“Phlogiston Heart. Could you call that a burning belief? I suppose that is the core of the spell and the part that manages the presentation. Then if I follow your rules…”

Kagami threw her sword into the sky and prepared her stance.

...It is probably my limbs and awareness of my heart that matter.

As she thought, the sword fell from the sky. The hilt was pointed up and the blade down. The tip of the massive blade produced a sound of destruction as it stabbed into the ground.

Immediately afterwards, Kagami raised her voice.

"Summon Normal Frame. ...That is how it works, right?"

"Teacher, I'm detecting a large-scale ley line vibration in the eastern ruins. No, two of them!"

A girl in the classroom spoke while holding up a crystal pendant.

Similarly, another girl raised her head.

"The special equipment, spell, and honors divisions

are worried too. There's a stir running through our unique ether. The servants are probably causing a commotion right now."

However, the previous girl's report pointed to a certain fact.

"The stray witch summoned a Normal Device, too?"

A clap answered that question. It came from the teacher on the podium. She looked up at the students and spoke.

"A Normal Frame is a general term referring to both the Normal Device weapon and the Normal Form clothing, but that equipment is a manifestation of the summoner's mind created with a servant's power."

And...

"The engine system that supports the Frame is controlled by the Phlogiston Heart we all possess. In that case, it would be entirely possible for this stray witch to summon the same sort of system. She only

needs to possess a witch's heart, the Phlogiston Heart that allows one to alter the world as they see fit."

Horinouchi saw the girl summon a Normal Frame. No, she had already summoned a Device, so she was only summoning a Normal Form.

But even as she watched it happen right in front of her, she could not believe it. The engine system and everything else were included and the armor was attached, but...

"You can summon an entire Normal Frame without a servant!?"

"I've been wondering. Can you not?"

"The only one who can do that is-..."

She was cut off by a single spell circle appearing in the girl's chest armor.

It was decorated with Greek characters that said "Burning Belief".

It was not actually a Phlogiston Heart System, but it must have filled the same role.

...Did she watch my summoning and copy it?

That is insane, thought Horinouchi. *I've never come across anyone like this before.*

And this was more than an unintentional copy.

During her summoning, the multiple spells Horinouchi had used had pulled the ley lines and ether toward her. All of that was released when she ended the summoning and this girl had targeted that instant.

A Normal Device was a weapon made of ether.

The girl's was stabbed into the ground.

Ley lines flowed through all space, but their concentration was especially dense underground. The ether blade must have acted as a keystone to the ley lines gathered there and thus supplied her with power.

On top of that, she summoned the engines. To

directly take in the ether and ley lines she had gathered, the ether engines had used the "mold" left by the departing ley lines and ether.

In other words, she had intentionally copied Horinouchi.

She had already created her Device, so she had only summoned the Form. That cut down the time required.

So by the time she knocked her fists together…

"I have borrowed a lot for this match, but will this work?"

She had done a splendid job.

The Normal Form was symmetrical. She had directly used a portion of Horinouchi's system, but…

"If you think this is not fair, I can release it."

"The Phlogiston Heart System is meant for any witch above a certain level. You can tune the engines for your own needs, but everyone uses one of a few basic models. If modelling yours after that is

unfair, then I too am not playing fair."

"What do you mean by that?"

Horinouchi was confused.

She had been expecting a sign of comprehension such as "I see" or "understood", but that was not what she got.

...How can she ask what I mean?

As she had said, the Phlogiston Heart System did more than simply create a weapon out of ether. It first created engines out of ether so they could strengthen what came later. The engines provided the power assistance needed to complete one's equipment. And after it was complete, the engines were used to increase the output of the equipment.

"I mean the days of merely creating a weapon from ether and wielding them with brute strength are long gone."

Her opponent did not respond.

She simply stared at Horinouchi and inhaled.

She intended to move.

The Suzaku appeared on Horinouchi's shoulder and gave a powerful cry.

Was it meant to warn Horinouchi or intimidate her opponent? Either way, the sharp cry was higher-pitched than any Horinouchi had heard before.

...Just like that night ten years ago.

So she too breathed in and named herself. This was a battle between witches. She doubted it would be listed in the official records, but she raised her Normal Device regardless.

"I am Horinouchi Mitsuru, Student Council President of Shihouin Academy and #4 in the world witch rankings. My combat style is 'Shrine Maiden'. I challenge you to an official match."

"This just sounds bloody. So what is mine?"

It was obvious at a glance. Then again, a Normal Form was a representation of that person's heart.

Horinouchi simply spoke the name of the designation she assumed it was from its appearance alone.

"Holy Knight-style. I believe that is a rather old design."

"I guess the previous stuff is influencing it. Oh, well. Thanks."

The girl showed off a small smile.

It was not a false smile. Her honest thanks could be seen in it.

"Horinouchi, you can deal with my affiliation and whatever on your own. ...At any rate, I will accept your challenge as a chance to study."

She slowly opened her mouth.

"My name is Kagami Kagami. I hope you will remember it."

A barrier covered the classroom window.

It was a thick shutter. Each individual panel of armor was fairly large, but its physical defensive ability was less important than the multiple defense spell system incorporated into the inside.

The insides of the classroom walls were covered in a system equivalent to the shutter. The classroom grew dark and reinforcing and buffering control spells appeared in the four corners of the ceiling and floor as well as in a few other places.

“This will allow us to endure a Magino Frame attack while inside the classroom. Similar spell defense barriers will have risen in places along Tokyo Bay’s coast to protect the people there.”

As the teacher spoke, noises shook the classroom.

They were located on the bay, so the noise reached them after echoing off the massive ocean surface.

“That’s the sound of the air being split,” said

someone while staring up into the unseen sky.

Someone else bent their fingers to count.

“It’s moving at over 200 meters per second. If they’re doing this immediately after summoning their Normal, I wish I’d napped in the courtyard instead of going to class. I could have seen an air battle between top rankers.”

“Wait.”

One of them spoke behind one of the stepped classroom’s desks so the teacher would not notice.

“My dad’s outside and he just told me the stray witch’s combat style is Holy Knight. But I thought that style couldn’t do aerial battles.”

“Witches are all about exceptions to the rules,” someone whispered back.

Two loud rumbles shook the ceiling and they all shrugged.

“Holy Knight equipment is slow and old and they can never find the right person for it, so how is

someone using that in an aerial battle against the Suzaku shrine maiden?"

"C'mon, everyone. You can find exceptions everywhere and in everything," said the teacher after looking up at the rising rumble and reverberation. "A witch's Frame is a manifestation of the summoner's mind created with a servant's power."

Realizing the teacher had heard them, the girls either put up their guard or sighed, but one of them asked a question.

"But, teacher. Why are they modeled after the equipment used by different ancient professions? I'd like to freely design one into something more fashionable."

"That is to raise the manifestation of the presentation and increase how active it is afterwards. The historical 'forms' have their reasons. Don't tell me you wanted to fight the Black Witch in a night dress. Listen."

As she spoke, new sounds joined the reverberation of the air: sounds of clashing metal and blasting air.

“Sword fighting and cannon fire.”

“Yes.” The teacher nodded. “The basic design of the Normal Frame is the weapon based in the user’s mind and beliefs and the equipment based on their occupation. I’m sure anyone in the ranker class is entirely focused on strengthening and retouching them.”

So…

“I don’t know about this stray witch, but it is certain that Miss Horinouchi has the upper hand as far as building up one’s Frame is concerned.”

The teacher did not stop there.

“But even if your rank is lower than hers, you still have a role on Hexennacht. You understand how likely that is after the tragedy ten years ago, don’t you?”

Everyone stiffened at that question.

They heard a cannon fired far overhead. The splitting of the air now sounded like distant thunder.

“You will receive the most support from your servant. The individual servant determines the coloration of your equipment, but be careful if you choose a servant for fashion reasons. A servant has a symbiotic relationship with its witch, so you cannot swap it out. If you do end up with a servant partner that creates a color you don’t like…”

One of the students raised her hand while looking up into the sky.

Despite the battle overhead, this was still class time, so there was something else they needed to focus on.

“We’ve already started working towards opposing Hexennacht, but…”

The girl turned her back on the shuttered window as she spoke.

“If there is a problem with our equipment, we can hurry over to the clothing division and ask them to

find a way to modify the design. For a servant's idiosyncrasies, we need to get a breeder to fix it."

"Yes."

The teacher nodded and made sure she and the students were focused on her again.

"During my generation's Hexennacht, we were told 'that kind of selfishness' was not allowed, but this is a much nicer age."

"Then," said one student while raising her hand.

She was the one who had received a report from her father earlier and she leaned forward as she asked a question.

"Teacher, is it possible to summon a Frame without a servant?"

"It is said only one person can do that."

After looking across all of her students, the teacher continued.

"Only the Black Witch, mankind's fated enemy who

sealed herself in the moon, the source of this world's magic power, and left Hexennacht as an assignment for us."

Kagami was amazed at how clear the air was.

It was early summer, but the air was chilly. Of course, she was over ten kilometers up. Also, there was a reason she was able to fly and focus on her fighting.

"I see. The engines supporting this outfit take care of the protective spells the spell user would normally have to cast."

She saw Tokyo Bay down below. A school was located at the center of its deep shape.

She had heard that school raised witches.

However...

...Around it.

Tokyo was destroyed.

Occupied villages were visible on the southwest side of Tokyo Bay and heading toward the Yokohama region and she could see the air wavering from the smoke and heat of people living there.

But a quick turn to the north and everything changed.

A giant crater existed around Shinjuku and it had become a lake. Several other smaller holes decorated the ruined metropolis. In places, diagonal gashes cut into the city's shape.

Destruction had transformed the buildings into twisted pieces of art. Some had been compressed downwards and some had had half the building torn away by a spherical shape.

"What is this?" muttered Kagami.

At the same time, something flew toward her.

It had red hair.

It was Horinouchi.

The ether light of her Normal Frame caused her hair

to glow red and she held her weapon at the ready.

It looked like some kind of long gun. The gun resembled a red and white dragon's head or a bird with its wings spread behind it.

She held it toward Kagami and accelerated diagonally through the sky.

"— — — —"

She fired.

It fired an ether shell created inside the gun, but it had likely had its physical hardness increased. Kagami accelerated to the side to dodge.

...Ohh.

As the shot broke through an explosion of water vapor and flew past her, she noted arrow feathers on the high-speed shell.

The sound arrived after the fact and Kagami approached Horinouchi at the same kind of speed.

She understood the principle behind her flight, but

she had not quite grasped the technique needed to take tight turns. The flight primarily used the accelerators on her leg armor, which allowed her to easily swing herself around by moving her upper body.

Needless to say, if she effectively used that unbalanced nature…

“I can turn just my body while maintaining my speed forward!”

She twisted to the right while flying straight ahead.

Once her speed reached a certain level, her entire body could no longer stop its forward movement for reasons other than air resistance. And so she rotated her body to turn right and then backwards.

“There you are!”

About two hundred meters back and to her right, she spotted Horinouchi.

The girl jumped away.

To forcibly alter her trajectory, she had used her leg

accelerators for a short hop.

She had moved down. The sky was vast and allowed her to move in three dimensions, but she chose the direction that made it more difficult to lower her speed.

At first glance, one would see the ruins down below and her actions would be harder to distinguish.

Also...

“She is used to this.”

Kagami jumped, too. As soon as she did, a shell passed through the spot she had just vacated.

In an instant, she crouched down in midair and moved as if toppling forward.

“Like this?”

She kicked at the heavens.

The acceleration was instantaneous, so she continued doing it. She took a second, third, and then fourth accelerating step.

“There.”

Ahead of her, she saw Horinouchi raising her gun toward her with the ruins in the background.

Kagami was going to be shot, so she took evasive action.

She tore through the sky, hopped right, hopped left despite the shell flying toward her, and then…

“…!”

She sliced through the flying shell with her large sword.

She could feel the straight-line force of the shell and she knew Horinouchi would be at the other end of that force.

And she was.

The rest was simple. Kagami accelerated to fill the gap between them.

“—————”

Horinouchi fired on Kagami again from a distance of

one hundred meters.

The shell flew straight once more. It was an honest trajectory that demonstrated the girl's diligent spirit, so Kagami sliced through the shell again and...

"Fire!"

She immediately put her sword in firing mode. Instead of a blank, she fired an actual shell along the path she planned to fly.

Kagami thought she had hit.

In the instant after an attack, when her opponent would have been checking to see if she had hit or not, she had counterattacked.

It would have been difficult for Horinouchi to evade while holding that gun.

However...

"Ohh..."

Ether light exploded and sprayed outward. And

another light was visible beyond the fragments and blast of Kagami's shell.

It was an arrow.

The arrow was shaped like the shells Horinouchi had fired earlier. However, there were more than one and they did not fly forward like shells.

Horinouchi's right hand was raised toward Kagami and it held three stacked arrows like a shield.

Past the three arrows, her sharp gaze was focused on Kagami.

While flying and trying to take up a good position against Kagami, the Suzaku shrine maiden spoke.

"My shield cannot be broken with a single individual's power."

"So this world also holds that tradition!"

After speaking, Horinouchi shut down her shield.

Kagami also prepared her next attack.

But Horinouchi was faster. Her gun was still pointed

at Kagami and…

“Firing form!”

With a rotating metallic sound, the back end of her gun opened wide.

It was not a gun at all. It was a bow. The bow had two wheels at the base and it opened up in the sky, resembling a dragon or the Suzaku.

As she flew, Horinouchi drew the ether bowstring.

“Cry out, Akerindou.”[1]

In an instant, a dozen shells flew toward Kagami. And they were homing shells.

Chapter 4: Smile to the Moon

Chapter 4

“Smile to the Moon”

You are in such a hurry
You are in such a hurry
You are in such a hurry
Can you really pull this off?

You are in such a hurry

You are in such a hurry

You are in such a hurry

Can you really pull this off?

The white knight flew through the sky.

The red shrine maiden pursued her.

More and more homing shots were rapidly fired from the expanded red bow.

As if chasing their prey, several dozen arrows flew against the wind, descended, and otherwise pursued the knight.

The knight made several short midair dashes and occasionally…

“Kh!”

She would throw in quick bursts of acceleration that caused her entire body to tremble to put some

distance between herself and the shots that were catching up fast.

Occasionally, the homing maws would approach down at her feet and cross paths.

They prepared to devour her, but she made a quick dash to put some distance between them.

Immediately afterwards, the clear shells collided with each other and detonated. Several bright lights of destruction filled the sky and left a trail behind the knight.

The red shrine maiden did not hold back. She always remained behind the barrage and she constantly fired and accelerated.

The bundle of shells she fired now resembled a flock of birds taking flight.

The twang of the bowstring filled the sky with repetitive music.

She forced the knight downwards.

If she was to corner the girl, she had to send her to

the ruins below where there was no escape.

Hiding behind the buildings would be of no help. The arrows could easily punch through the decrepit structures and she could supply the finishing blow in the unmaintained and abandoned streets.

Even so, the knight may have thought they would act as cover.

She took the lead and flew quickly into the city.

Horinouchi did not slow down.

She flew at around five meters above the surface. She was very nearly exceeding three hundred kilometers per hour, so merely touching the asphalt would be fatal.

However, she still did not slow down.

She could not when the witch named Kagami was actually accelerating up ahead.

...How reckless.

They were traveling at nearly ninety meters per second now. Even if the city was in ruins, there were still obstacles.

Before the city had become what it was now, elevated highways had run through it and cars had driven along them.

All of that had fallen into ruin, but they had not completely vanished.

“It’s been ten years, hasn’t it?”

A decade before, it had not been like this. Horinouchi vaguely remembered it.

There had been people here and the streets had been filled with light, noise, and movement.

All of that was gone now.

Instead, she and the other witch were creating different lights, noises, and movements.

“There.”

She fired straight forward.

She fired a barrage of homing shots.

However, she did not stop there. She started on a further attack.

“A barrier!”

A soon as the barrage raced out, she expanded a large spell barrier around it. Every projectile within the designated range of the spell circle had barrier-style course restrictions installed inside. They were then kick-started.

The group of shells flew.

They tore through the air and surrounded Kagami from above, below, left, and right. However, the course restrictions prevented them from hitting the surrounding buildings or the ground.

All of them took the shortest possible route to reach and corner Kagami.

Meanwhile, Horinouchi saw Kagami move.

The girl turned back toward her even as she moved at such high speeds.

Horinouchi understood.

She had demonstrated this form of movement earlier. After speeding up, she let her momentum carry her forward while moving her own body around freely.

...She will intercept the initial homing shells with her sword and then fire a counterattack.

The girl was not going to carelessly let Horinouchi get in close. She had the skill and preparation needed to intercept the shots.

So Horinouchi fired again as Kagami turned around.

She fired three non-homing but high-speed shots.

The arrows split the air and created explosions of water vapor.

Kagami reacted by accelerating even as she faced backwards.

...They're going to hit!

That was exactly what happened.

The three shots struck Kagami.

However, they transformed into bursting light. Because they were travelling at ninety meters per second, Horinouchi quickly passed by the light. The scattering ether and the solid sound slipped through her blowing hair.

Kagami had defended.

Horinouchi saw the girl had stopped the arrows with the tip of her sword which was raised like a shield. Kagami and the sword were blown backwards and she used that extra momentum to escape the pursuing homing shots. Also...

“She fired!?”

She held the sword like a musical instrument and fired it diagonally into the sky.

It was a meaningless shot. It looked like she had been trying to hit Horinouchi but had her aim thrown horribly off by her defense.

Except that was not the case at all.

The shell flew toward a giant building that had originally been a luxury hotel. The white exterior walls were stained by the rain and the sky was visible through the large hole in the center.

Partway up the building, a column on either side supported the giant hole and Kagami's blast tore into the closer of the two.

Its destruction sounded like a strong thread snapping.

The rest was simple.

The wind roared and the collapse began.

"Are you insane!?"

The hundred meter square structure collapsed toward their path forward.

Kagami flipped around in midair.

She turned her back on Horinouchi and accelerated.

The giant mass in the sky above felt like it was about

to fall on top of her.

Regardless, she accelerated.

As if kicking off the air, she collapsed forward and took a path that would slip below the collapsing building.

...Not long now.

She read the "gap" she needed in order to make it through.

It all came down to her timing.

"Come!"

As soon as she shouted, three swift attacks arrived from behind.

Horinouchi had fired, but...

"＿＿＿"

The triple attack passed above Kagami and struck something else.

It hit the damaged portion of the collapsing building. It accurately pierced through the spot still

connecting the collapsing top half to the bottom half.

As a result, the great mass lost its only support, making it accelerate and change its course.

It was now going to collide with Kagami.

With the inside pointed downward, it slid down as if to catch her within.

Her course below would not make it in time.

She watched as the giant wall fell in front of her.

“I see,” she shouted. “Instead of shooting me, you chose to block my path and stop me. So that is who you are, Horinouchi!”

She was aware that she was smiling as she moved. She had her entire body jump upwards.

“It was well worth hoping you would be that kind of person!”

Horinouchi sent herself on a rising trajectory to circle around the falling building.

As if drawing in the air ahead of her, she rapidly swung her entire body upwards. After confirming that Kagami collided with the wall below, she would slow down and finish the girl off.

But she was not able to do that.

When she looked down, she saw Kagami launching her body in another direction.

Kagami leaned forward and low, so Horinouchi assumed she had chosen a downward trajectory.

But she had not.

The white holy knight gathered all the momentum that was sending her body rotating forward.

"...!"

And she leaped.

She kicked off the air and leaped upwards with a movement similar to returning from a handstand.

...That's ridiculous!

She had changed her great forward acceleration into

an almost entirely vertical jump.

Inertia had to be placing a heavy burden on her body, but…

“Kah!”

The knight let out a rough breath and completed her movement.

She had just barely made it. She was close enough to place her hand on the edge of the falling building to assist her rotation.

Regardless, she had done it.

And Horinouchi realized Kagami had turned toward her.

She still had forward momentum, but she was no longer flying.

She placed her feet on top of the collapsing and falling building, back stepped, and slid backwards.

She held her sword at the hip. The shockwave of her passage shattered the building’s remaining

windows, sparks flew from the soles of her feet, and she had her sword at the ready.

She planned to fire.

The sword was in firing mode and Horinouchi noticed light already inside the muzzle.

…She's trying for a counter!?

Horinouchi could block a simple shell with her three arrows, so Kagami had opted for a counter.

She would be stopped while Horinouchi would swiftly charge in.

But once Horinouchi matched their altitudes, she could fire directly at her. She was guessing their relative speeds would allow her shell to break through Horinouchi's shield.

That was what this was.

When she realized what that meant, Horinouchi could not stop the heat that rose from her neck and into her cheeks.

...Sh-she predicted I would drop the building in front of her!?

Just as Horinouchi felt like she had been called naïve, Kagami fired on her.

The counter flew toward the very center of her body. As an archer, she could tell just how splendid a shot it was.

Horinouchi made up her mind.

She decided it was her experience that kept her from choosing any kind of defense.

She did something else here.

"Akerindou."

Inside its spell circle, her Phlogiston Heart heated up. While assuming its heat was what she felt in her cheeks, she drew the ether bowstring all at once.

The instant she grabbed the string, a shell was formed in Akerindou's chamber. And this shot was

large enough to extend from the chamber into the acceleration pathway.

...Even if she defends, this will smash a Normal Device made without a servant!

With that thought, she looked forward.

Kagami had targeted the very center of her body, so she fired diagonally down from above that.

“Cry out!”

Kagami saw the light shatter in midair and a vermilion arrow fly her way.

The vermilion arrow flew down diagonally and her own shell crashed into it.

But the enemy’s shot managed to pierce through her own and it flew on at high speed.

It was on a perfect collision course and it was quite powerful. Kagami assumed her sword would be destroyed if she tried to defend.

“Honestly!”

A smile appeared on her lips, but she forced it down and gave a shout.

“I must ask!”

With that, she raised her sword.

A moment later, the coming arrow collided with the protecting blade.

It was a direct hit and the giant blade shattered in an instant.

...I shot her down!

Horinouchi saw light explode atop the falling building.

The scattering light was clearly ether light. The enemy’s Normal Device had been destroyed.

The enemy had made a counterattack, so Horinouchi had done the same.

And her shell had more force behind it. That was her

reason behind firing and it had produced definite results.

However, she still did not hold back. She maintained the momentum of her flight, prepared Akerindou in firing form, and flew directly above the collapsing building.

She fired again.

She fired a non-homing multi-shot toward the center of Kagami's previous location. A human form was vaguely visible through the glowing smoke, but it lacked accuracy. That was her reasoning for using the multi-shot.

The ether bowstring twanged once.

The barrage of multiple bullets flew toward the enemy below.

Immediately afterwards, the falling building crashed into the ground.

The sound of breaking rock rang out.

Below, the building seemed to bounce lightly.

It was an old and rotting building and walls that had lost their connections fell from the ceilings and floors that were perpendicular to the ground. The roar of collapse and clouds of dust sent the air inside the building blowing out.

With the walls knocked loose, the building looked like a grid structure.

This opened plenty of massive gaps that allowed the rising dust to settle down.

Horinouchi had a thought as she looked at the honeycomb-like wreckage: *My shot was almost entirely useless, wasn't it?*

But she saw something in the scattering smoke: light.

It was clearly ether light. And…

"She's re-summoning a Frame!?"

Her question proved accurate.

Kagami stood directly below her.

Her arms were spread and she was completing a certain task.

She was doing something to her shattered Normal Device.

“Reform!”

Kagami breathed in.

...That was a splendid shot.

Comparing just their weapons, her Normal Device could not hope to stand up to Horinouchi’s. Not only had she not used a servant, but she had made hers far too roughly because she had been copying someone and doing it for the first time.

She had been fighting with no engines or anything else in her weapon.

She had wanted to reform it to fix that, but she had not been able to spare the time needed to officially complete the ceremony and the ether was not something one could gather immediately.

That was why she had wanted to recycle her previous weapon. She had decided to reform the existing Normal Device which she considered to be a wonderfully ecological plan.

However, there had been a problem.

Despite her complaints, she had done a good job of making the weapon. It was not easy to break.

That was why she had used Horinouchi's attack. She had made a counterattack. If that was enough to defeat her opponent, that was fine. But if she instead used her opponent's attack to destroy her weapon, she could use that ether as well.

Either result had been fine by her.

...So...

She reformed her large sword with an ether engine in the center.

This would work.

Unlike before, the sword had an acceleration thruster contained in the guard.

“Now, then.”

She grabbed the hilt and took flight.

She flew vertically to reach the shrine maiden witch located directly overhead.

The servant looked up at the battle in the sky.

It had left the area occupied by man and reached an area of nothing but ruins.

It had a certain amount of knowledge supplied for its survival, this was an abandoned city, and no pursuers were coming. Therefore, everything would be okay if it settled down here.

But the sky was noisy and, when it looked up, it realized something.

The person who had allowed it to escape was fighting.

It understood that.

...What is this?

She had nothing. When it had first met that person, it had not sensed the ether power any of this world's witches would have or anything else either.

This was strange.

How could she fight if that was the case? How could she fight just like witches did?

"— — — —"

The servant did not know. But that dragon child had a thought: the method, means, and technique did not matter. She was fighting using something beyond its knowledge. In that case…

…*Why?*

Why?

Not "how".

"Why" was she fighting?

And why had she let the dragon child escape?

Its very existence was a mistake, so why?

"— — — —"

It looked up into the sky.

Two lights were wrapping around each other at high speed, scattering other lights, and rising into the heavens.

They would not stop.

Horinouchi could tell her enemy had grown stronger.

...This girl!

The girl was generally following their rules, but she would occasionally do something that ignored them completely.

Rankers would occasionally exist outside the rules like that, but this girl was especially bad. Not only had she remade her Normal Device mid-battle, but...

“She’s keeping up with my speed!?”

Horinouchi was a shrine maiden, but her servant

was the Suzaku. When it came to flight speed and control, she did not just rival the three ranked above her, she believed she outdid them at least in some aspects.

However...

“Sorry, but I am borrowing your power. You should have expected that.”

The girl dodged a homing arrow Horinouchi fired at close range and she swung her sword forward.

Horinouchi deflected it with her three arrow shield and placed some homing shots behind her.

They had little initial speed, but the homing barrage accelerated and almost seemed to hop over to accurately pursue the girl. However, that girl named Kagami sliced them and swept them away with her sword while accelerating after Horinouchi.

“Listen, Horinouchi!”

“What point is there in speaking with you!?”

Kagami paid no heed to that response. She pressed

her sword against the arrow shield, trying to break through.

“This world!”

Kagami raised her eyebrows as she asked her question.

“What is your purpose here when everything is so badly destroyed!?”

And…

“Those weapons. What enemy are they meant to protect you from!?”

“Have you never heard of Hexennacht!?” asked Horinouchi on reflex.

…There’s no way she couldn’t have!

Horinouchi could not be the only one with such fresh memories of ten years before. Even so, Kagami crossed her arms in midair.

“I have not! So I ask that you tell me!”

…Th-that idiot!

She was too honest or too bold or too something.

At any rate, she was hopelessly ignorant.

Horinouchi began explaining what she had learned in class countless times and saw or heard mentioned on the internet or in conversation on a daily basis.

“Listen.”

She fired arrows and dodged attacks as she spoke to the idiot.

“It’s the Black Witch.”

As she flew, Horinouchi caught Kagami’s sword on her shield and twisted it.

She faced them both toward the ground and performed several rolls while glowing sparks flew from the area of continuing contact.

“Can’t you see this?”

Horinouchi ascended through the sky as she spoke.

“There is a reconstructed city directly below, but the

rest of Tokyo around it, the rest of the Japanese Archipelago, and – most importantly – the rest of the world was mostly destroyed. Can't you see that?"

"What is-...?"

"This was the result of our battle with the Black Witch! It happened ten years ago and has been the way of our world for long, long before that!"

She shoved Kagami away, fired, and fired some more, but Kagami caught the homing shots on her sword and swept them away.

"Battling the Black Witch is the way of this world? Is there really a battle like that!?"

"Yes, that is Hexennacht. The Black Witch is said to have created this world. But when she grew tired of it, she attempted to destroy it. Ever since the people sealed her away and she responded with a sneer, the seal is opened one night every ten years when we must confront and defeat her."

However...

“The opening in the barrier is small, so generally only one or two individuals are chosen to confront her. And that battle has never succeeded even once in all of human history. She is always resealed.”

“Then,” said Kagami as she flew forward.

While ascending, she forcefully raised her sword and thrust it forward, so Horinouchi had to catch it on her three arrows.

Kagami quickly moved in much closer.

With the space for the blade and shield between them, she asked another question. They continued accelerating toward the heavens all the while.

“Where is this Black Witch?”

“You don’t know?” asked Horinouchi as she fired from behind her shield. Her voice rose to a shout. “The moon!!”

Faced with that simple word, Kagami briefly forgot to defend.

She was late to notice the shell approaching her.

“Oh!”

Her shoulder armor was broken.

Due to her rapid flight, the impact caused her to collide with the air.

She seemed to bounce and then flipped around in midair.

“Ha.”

She let out a rough breath and tried to control her body.

…*Yes.*

A white circle sat in the center of the blue sky overhead.

It was the moon.

Supposedly, the witch that had created and subsequently tried to destroy the world was there.

Once every ten years, one could meet her and battle her.

In that case…

“Ha.”

Horinouchi heard Kagami's laughter.

They were already several hundred meters apart, but the other girl's voice reached her even over that distance.

"Ha ha."

Something like waves of light appeared around Kagami.

They were the ley lines. Normally, only the engines of her Frame would affect them, but she must have been using some other power to pressurize the ether of the ley lines and that ether was rejoicing.

...What is that?

"Ha ha!"

As a shrine maiden, Horinouchi knew a lot about ley lines and ether, but she had never seen this kind of ley line interference. If she tried it, she could tune it better and cover a greater area, but she doubted she could achieve that much power.

The phrase “brute strength” came to her, but this girl was also skilled in combat techniques.

The girl’s powerful voice reached her through the ley lines.

“Ha ha ha!”

Her voice would likely reach any witch or anyone else with special powers. If one pressed their ear to the ley lines, it would reach them as if through a duct.

“Finally.”

Kagami brought a hand to her forehead but then swept that hand outwards.

“Finally.”

“You…”

Horinouchi’s voice must have reached Kagami in the same way because she turned around.

She raised her eyebrows in a smile, pointed toward the center of the heavens with her right hand, and

gave an announcement.

“I will defeat this Black Witch of which you speak.”

Chapter 5: Questioning Thoughts

Chapter 5

“Questioning Thoughts”

Farewell
Is not an antonym of hello

Farewell

Is not an antonym of hello

…Defeat the Black Witch?

Horinouchi gasped at Kagami's words.

This enemy could wield power that seemed to ignore the world's rules and she had just announced she would eliminate the Black Witch who could be called the source of all those rules.

However, Horinouchi did not know what to think about this.

They all wished to achieve that same goal, so it might have been best to think of Kagami as an ally.

But…

"What…"

This girl had suddenly appeared and desired the privilege they were all working to obtain.

And…

“What do you understand!?”

Horinouchi recalled that her own mother had been the one chosen for the previous Hexennacht.

As a result, the world had been driven to its current state and her mother had been on the verge of death by the time she had been taken in.

However, she had left the Suzaku and plenty of spells with Horinouchi and had reached for her daughter from the stretcher.

Horinouchi remembered her beautiful smile then. As strength had left the hand touching Horinouchi’s cheek, she had grabbed it with both hands to support it and hold the weakening in check.

…And I begged her not to leave me alone.

Even as a child she had understood her position as a witch and had had a fair amount of power.

But her wish then had not been granted.

And that was why she was doing what she did now.

On that night, she had had a wish that no witch could grant.

She could not allow anyone else to have a wish like that. She would eliminate the source of such wishes. And she remembered what her mother had said with a smile back then.

“＿＿＿＿＿”

She still did not understand what it had meant.

Assuming she would eventually understand, she had sealed it inside her heart, but she had yet to find the answer.

And so…

“I have a question!”

She prepared to ask while instantly firing another shot.

She fired again and again. She swung Akerindou and used that motion to scatter arrows across the sky.

The white moon sat at the top of the blue sky, but a surge of red light quickly filled the heavens.

The loud notes of the bowstring never fully faded and she shouted her question.

“What can you do!?”

Kagami replied while simply pointing the tip of her blade toward Horinouchi.

“If you wish for it, I can bring you happiness, Horinouchi.”

The white Holy Knight instantly flew toward her.

Kagami reached a certain conclusion.

...I cannot defeat this opponent in anything but a head-on contest.

Horinouchi primarily used long range attacks, but she could place her homing shots in midair for a close range battle. Carelessly charging in would only get Kagami surrounded by a wall of arrows.

And if Kagami shifted to moving around, Horinouchi would put some distance between them and begin attacking.

That was what had happened when she had knocked down the building. If she had not carelessly stopped moving then, she would not have been able to constantly observe her or get her to approach.

Kagami could only describe the girl as reliable.

In that case, there was only one way: head-on.

When facing the girl head-on, the homing arrows lost their meaning.

If Kagami charged in at full speed, their relative speed would allow her to shake off the homing arrows and reach Horinouchi before the arrows could catch up.

The high-speed straight-line shots would be a problem, but…

“That is why I remade my sword!”

Kagami accelerated.

She leaped through the air as if running and made quick jukes to either side.

She travelled several hundred meters in no time at all.

“Ohhh.”

The arrows of red light pursued her in gouging arcs and they seemed to arrive from every direction instead of just overhead.

She made a midair sidestep. The barrage shook as it followed and the arrows collided with each other, but…

…Here it comes!

A high-speed shot arrived from directly ahead.

But she did not care.

She thrust out the tip of her sword.

“Here I go!”

She smashed it.

Horinouchi fired.

She fired three shots, two shots, three shots, and then…

“A concentrated shell!”

There was no need to aim. The white knight was charging straight in like a mere target, so Horinouchi prepared to destroy her.

The bow and arrow moved like a hammer that functioned over long ranges.

The strikes of light ricocheted off the knight’s armor.

Her helmet cracked and her shoulder and leg armor shattered, but…

“…!”

As soon as Horinouchi realized she was drawing close, her arrow failed to hit.

Kagami had pushed her sword toward Horinouchi and then hid behind it.

Before, her armor would have been in the way,

preventing her from using the weapon for cover.

She may have suddenly pulled out this trick after approaching, but…

“That doesn’t matter!”

Horinouchi formed a long, heavy shell inside the chamber. She activated the acceleration spell of the acceleration pathway and let loose the kick of the ether bowstring.

Just as she was going to fire, she saw the sword transform.

…Firing form! Oh, no.

A reflexive decision saved her.

She leaped around a dozen meters backwards and abandoned the chamber’s shell into the air.

A moment later, Kagami’s shot pierced through the shell Horinouchi had nearly fired.

Kagami had planned this.

No matter how long and heavy it was, it was nothing

more than an ether shell if it had not passed through the acceleration pathway to be fired.

That was what Kagami had attempted to exploit. She had created a situation in which Horinouchi needed to fire on the sword and then she had fired her own shell just after Horinouchi's had been created.

If the shell exploded inside the barrel, not even Akerindou would survive unharmed.

Horinouchi had managed to avoid that situation, but...

"Kh!"

The sword tore through the fragments of red light from the destroyed shell and it continued toward Horinouchi.

It had already left firing mode and it reached her as a thick striking weapon.

"This isn't over yet!!"

Horinouchi activated her shield to buffer against the strike from Kagami's blade.

...I blocked it!

Horinouchi had been pushed back with the shield, but she could fall back and set out some homing shots to put some distance between them. That was her standard strategy.

But she heard a voice.

“Ha.”

It began with the exhalation of a rough breath and it continued from there.

“You said a single individual could not reach you, didn’t you?”

Beyond the blade tip on the shield, Kagami raised her head.

Her sweat-covered face contained a smile and lifted eyebrows. That face forcibly accelerated.

“A direct blow for the first strike!”

After the shield was pushed back and bent, a

metallic sound reached Horinouchi's ears.

She saw Kagami's sword open into firing mode and the muzzle was perfectly trained on her.

"Now the second strike!"

The impact reached her arms as she held up the shield.

Several spell circles opened to inform her that the three arrow shield was reaching its limit.

But...

...It can still survive this!

Kagami used the recoil of the point-blank shot to raise her sword overhead.

Seeing that, Horinouchi held Akerindou behind her. She planned to set some homing shots in midair and fall back.

However, Kagami rotated before her eyes.

The movement was much like a backflip and it sent the sword in a vertical swing.

“Ohhhh!”

Horinouchi could not believe her eyes.

Her opponent had used the recoil of the point-blank shot, and…

“…!”

After flipping upside down, the girl swung the “raised” sword upwards.

Her legs bit into the air in preparation for the impact.

“And the third strike!”

The three arrow shield shattered.

A solid sound shook the air, light sprayed outwards, and Horinouchi realized several spell circles had appeared in front of her.

They said “Impact Buffering”, “Pain Reduction”, and “Physical Strengthening”.

“Kh.”

It was a direct hit.

In an instant, she was sent several hundred meters straight up.

Kagami realized she had hit while feeling the side effects of her half rotation.

However…

“It wasn’t enough!?”

It had been a direct hit, but Kagami saw a small light growing more distant.

Directly ahead and moving away horizontally was the light of Horinouchi’s shells.

Horinouchi herself had been knocked upwards, so why was the red light of one of her shells located directly ahead?

…Was it to throw off my aim!?

When Horinouchi had realized she would be hit, she had fired an arrow behind her.

The recoil had moved her forward above the sword,

shifting her just a bit more toward the hilt.

It had still been a direct hit, it had broken through her shield, and she had likely been injured, but it had not been a clean hit.

Kagami realized that girl had good instincts and looked up.

She saw the moon in the daytime sky.

Horinouchi looked down at her with that white ring behind her.

Blood flowed from her forehead and both her chest armor and the left power arm that held her bow were damaged.

More importantly, she was out of breath and her shoulders were visibly rising and falling.

But...

“It seems you really don’t understand anything.”

A single spell circle floated up from her chest armor.

It was the Phlogiston Heart.

Her state of damage must have fed back into it because it was partially damaged, but it glowed pure red and even produced a flare.

“So let me tell you.”

As the girl spoke, Kagami saw a light.

In the air at Horinouchi’s feet…no, over a wide area around her, wavering light appeared, resembling a field of glowing red.

This was a large-scale ether ejection.

“Until this Phlogiston Heart breaks, a witch is never defeated.”

And…

“When the Phlogiston Heart heats up…”

Kagami heard the girl laugh. Her eyebrows lowered as the laughter escaped her lips.

“How about I tell you why a Normal Frame is known as a ‘Normal’ Frame?”

She spread her arms and clapped.

The loud sound rang out and she lowered her head quickly to give thanks.

The Suzaku cried out and the shrine maiden gave a shout.

“When her servant and Normal Frame recombine, a witch draws out her true form!”

Her dignified voice travelled across the sky.

“Summon Magino Frame!”

Koutarou had finished giving the evacuation order to the northern reconstructed area and he was now commanding the shrine and temple personnel as they performed ley line interference.

He had several spell circles opened and was gathering statistics data while having the shrines and temples of different areas suppress the ley line disturbances. If necessary, it was his job to send Shinto prayers and Buddhist mantras as suppression spells.

“Master Koutarou! Our shrine’s acoustic equipment is broken! What should we do!?”

“When that happens, you need to sing! Ready? One, two, three…go! ‘♪The women of Ise are salmon piiiink! That is fine by meee! And the gods and buddhas agreeeeee!’ ”

“Ssinging that would annoy everyone in the area!”

“Then go buy new equipment!”

He felt somewhat miffed that his singing had gone to waste, but warning signs suddenly appeared on the surrounding spell circles.

The ley line interference at a few different shrines had quickly exceeded its limits and pillars of light were exploding in the distant mountains and throughout the city.

It was obvious what was happening. A quick glance into the air was enough to tell.

“Lady Mitsuru!”

Something was being constructed in the deep blue

sky above.

A massive amount of ether spread out like a field of wheat and a massive form floated up from it.

It was a giant warship. A bow-shaped aerial cannon was visible in the sky.

It had rapidly taken shape, but it was at least five hundred meters long. The internal frame set in place, the exterior attached to it, and a metallic roar filled the air. Multi-layer ether armor and ether engines were added and it was completed with the ringing of a large bell.

“Magino Frame – Akerindou!”

Kagami saw it.

Its overall form looked like a dragon or a bird with its wings spread. It was shaped much like the bow Horinouchi held.

However, she held that bow in her hand and looked Kagami’s way from atop the radome equipped at its

center.

Her damaged Phlogiston Heart scattered red flares and beyond it…

“An outfit change? Is that what you call a Magino Frame?”

“Yes, it is.”

The girl had changed even more than before.

Not only had the damage been repaired, but she now wore a wing-like headdress and a stole. More armor had been attached here and there and the previous armor was a size bigger than before. The bow itself had not changed, but it was constantly enveloped in ether light and had likely received a power-up.

And at her feet, the massive form was complete.

“Let me tell you why you cannot defeat me.”

“You mean…?”

“This is the ultimate weapon created through a combination with your servant. This form of your

beliefs is based on the Normal Frame and can never be achieved alone."

In other words...

"This is the technology humanity has gathered together to fight the Black Witch! This is a magic wand measuring over 500 meters long! This is a Magino Frame!"

Kagami saw Horinouchi looking at her with a smile and lowered eyebrows.

Kagami was already damaged too and...

...Here it comes!

The five hundred meter cannon noisily opened.

It took the form of a bow. The central wheels produced the metallic sound of a large bell and the vermilion bow's wings spread. The central acceleration pathway and muzzle formed a cannon with a caliber of thirty meters.

Kagami began to evade, but...

“I will crush you.”

The cannon moved forward.

Kagami realized it was quite fast for its great size.

“Cry out, Akerindou.”

The cannon blast instantly crushed Kagami.

Horinouchi’s blast stabbed into the ruins.

Its power was limited. As the manager of a shrine, she was always trying to suppress any negative effects on the ley lines.

The vermilion pillar tore into the ruins of high-rise buildings and pierced into the crust.

At first, nothing happened. There was only a light tremor followed by silence.

But…

“…”

After two beats, it came.

The intense ringing of a large bell raced across the ground within a one hundred eighty meter radius of the strike.

The earth roared upwards from below and the buildings trembled and exploded. The air cried out as it shook and lightning raced through the sky.

Light instantly rose from the crust and into the air.

Immediately afterwards, that one hundred eighty meter radius was crushed. It almost looked like someone had smashed it between their hands.

As lightning covered everything and tremors scattered everywhere, it sounded a lot like divine thunder.

Above it all, a girl watched on from atop a massive vermilion bow. She clapped once and made an announcement.

“Load the next shot.”

Horinouchi was unable to determine where Kagami

was.

…Her ether is thin.

The initial report had mentioned this. Every witch had the ability to process ether within herself. They could let the ley lines pass through their body and extract ether from it like a tap.

…But she seems to lack that ability. I don't know how she can control so much ether like that, but that is what she's doing.

When Kagami had worn her Normal Frame, Horinouchi had been able to detect the ether forming the Frame and had set her homing arrows to lock onto that.

But that Frame was destroyed and the girl was likely having trouble in a number of ways.

"She is very strange."

Magino Frame – Akerindou's blast had not achieved a direct hit. It contained an ether tracking system for use against witches, but Horinouchi had not

activated the kinetic tracking system, so she did not know where Kagami had gone afterwards.

“But I know she’s alive.”

She was somewhere.

She was probably catching her breath and working out a new plan in the ruins below.

But once she remade her Normal Frame, it would all be over. Horinouchi would detect the ether and fire her main cannon. But until that happened…

…I cannot let my guard down.

“Secondary cannons.”

The Magino Frame had more than just the main cannon. Armor panels opened here and there, revealing secondary cannons. They were turret-less, but she used their homing setting to have them carpet bomb the ruins below.

The center of the ruins was completely abandoned. Not even animals approached out of fear of the lingering ether remnants. Even the vegetation was

thin.

It was an unbelievably large area of death.

...A Shinto witch attacks with purifying shells.

She wondered if she would be able to tune the ley lines there even a little as she fired the secondary cannons.

The attack from above was a straight-line carpet bombing created from a standard sixteen shots. Kagami analyzed it while catching her breath. Also...

...That is definitely going to consume the line I am on.

The secondary cannons likely had a caliber of two meters and thirty centimeters. Based on the noise, their barrels were short and the shells were guided ones that accelerated after being fired. With the direct hits and the shockwave as the shells passed by, this attack was specialized toward hitting a wide area.

“How troublesome,” muttered Kagami as she looked to her broken equipment and listened to the approaching shell hits. “Honestly, when they talk about surpassing your imagination, they are talking about something like this. I need to watch out for glass.”

She looked around.

She was in a dimly-lit space. It was the second story of what had likely been a department store. She guessed this had been a cafeteria with windows giving a view of the city. Sofa sets and tables were located here and there, but they had been shoved away from the windows.

Wind or some other kind of external pressure had entered through the windows.

“Was this part of that Hexennacht event from ten years ago?”

Kagami guessed that this world experienced a great calamity once a decade. And…

“The one ten years ago must have been especially bad.”

That would be why the girl named Horinouchi had shown something akin to anger.

She had to have a connection to Hexennacht.

“Saving her is going to be another difficult battle.”

She could fight.

She could re-summon her broken Normal Frame. The Phlogiston Heart indicator in the chest armor had not been completely destroyed.

...But how did she construct that Magino Frame thing?

Something that huge would not be easy to make. It would require a lot of knowledge as well as trial-and-error training. And Horinouchi would never give Kagami the time she needed to figure it out.

She wondered what to do as the sound of the carpet bombing approached. No, she could now see the cascade of destructive red light approaching through the city.

“I have no choice but to go for it.”

That said, re-summoning her Normal Frame would be dangerous. As soon as she did that, she would be detected and fired upon. Instead, she could fly as she was, repair the individual parts, and reach that Magino Frame.

...Should I try that?

As soon as she asked herself that, she noticed something in the shaking of the approaching bombing. A guest had arrived in the lounge.

It was a dragon child. It was the dragon servant she had let escape earlier.

The servant stared at the witch.

...I don’t understand.

It should not exist. It was a mistaken existence.

But she had let it escape.

And now she was fighting the 4th ranked witch. And

instead of an official ranker battle, this seemed to be a personal fight over the servant.

She was a mistaken existence, too. Her spells strayed from the common witch system and she was challenging a ranker to a personal fight.

But to be "mistaken" from a ranker's perspective was what their enemy, the Black Witch, would do.

Yet this witch was not the Black Witch.

So the dragon servant did not understand.

Why did she exist?

Why was she fighting?

And…

…*Why?*

Why was she not running away like it had?

"You there."

She looked to it and scratched her head.

"I apologize for being selfish, but could you lend me

your power?”

For what?

“I want to correct the mistakes of that witch up above.”

She said it.

“She should not be living a life that pours all of herself into the Black Witch.”

The servant trembled slightly.

Witches were the way of the world. Defeating the Black Witch was closely related to the very reason they existed.

But this person was rejecting that.

This person was facing the world head-on and not running.

...I understand.

It found the answer.

It understood something it wished it had not understood.

From the moment one chose to oppose the world, there was nowhere to run.

And that person was injured.

The dragon servant understood the situation. That was the type of creature it was. Even as a failure, it understood what mattered now.

And so…

“＿＿＿”

It stepped forward. Instead of running, it stepped forward.

The step was surprisingly light.

Horinouchi detected an ether reading ahead of her bombardment.

She had detection spells searching each block and the one for the southeast gave a warning.

Her eyes raced in that direction and spotted something strange. An ether reading was rapidly increasing inside a group of buildings that had likely surrounded a train station.

...Is that...?

In a spell circle, the ether output formed an upside-down funnel while superimposed on an image of the city. That reverse funnel swirled around and quickly reached the sky.

"Lady Mitsuru!"

As soon as white light burst from the surface to the southeast, a report came from Koutarou.

"I have detected a Magino Frame summoning!!"

The ruins broke apart over several dozen meters.

The intense noise resembled breaking stone and it stabbed up into the sky.

Rubble, crust, and sand erupted upwards and a giant

sword shot up from the earth.

And it did not stop there.

A great roar accompanied the destruction of the earth, a tremor ran through certain areas as if caught by the rising blade, and the ruins crumbled in those areas.

Finally, the giant sword flew into the sky.

This blue and white sword of a Holy Knight measured five hundred meters long.

Horinouchi watched from diagonally above.

...Is that a Magino Frame!?

She did not know how, but there had been a servant there. Kagami must have signed a contract with it to bind themselves as master and servant. And as a result...

"You're there, aren't you!?"

She was. The massive sword ascended at a speed

that made the word “rapid” seem insufficient.

And Horinouchi saw a Holy Knight facing her from the accelerating Magino Frame.

The knight was not just white as before.

Just like the Magino Frame, she was colored blue and white and she held her Normal Device at the ready.

Kagami Kagami stood on top of the giant blade.

“Is that your-...?”

“Yes, it is!”

Kagami held her Normal Device toward Horinouchi.

“It looks like this is my justice!”

Chapter 6: Showing Off Justice

Chapter 6

“Showing Off Justice”

Applaud me

Applaud me

The blade thrust toward the sky.

It shot above the destroyed and abandoned city and toward the great vermilion bow that had its back to the moon in the heavens above.

The bow and sword were both colossal.

No one may have been looking up from the empty city below, but their five hundred meter lengths allowed much more distant people to see them.

The sword accelerated toward the sky and the great bow there. Its first movement after appearing was to ascend in a straight line with its rear accelerators fully activated.

Meanwhile, the great bow showed no sign of evading even though preparatory light was filling the central acceleration cannon. The sword raced onward with the unwavering gaze of someone catching up to a friend and tapping them on the

shoulder.

A girl stood on the sword's guard.

The armored girl pointed forward as the wind swept back her hair decorations made of light.

Beyond the large finger of her power arm, she saw her opponent: a girl in shrine maiden garb standing on the great bow's upper radome.

The sword spoke as it picked up even more speed.

"I have a question, Horinouchi."

The bow responded without falling back.

"What is it, Kagami Kagami!?"

As they spoke, the sword opened up. Sparks scattered from the moving parts rubbing together and the sub-frame above the internal frame activated. By the time the sword split apart and a cannon jutted out, light had filled the rear shell formation area and accelerator.

Meanwhile, the light in the vermilion bow also

grew.

A voice spoke to that light.

“I had a thought.”

That thought being…

“You have your back to the moon, but that goes for the majority of this fight as well.”

So…

“When was the last time you looked up at the moon without thinking much of it?”

Horinouchi felt emotion welling up deep in her chest.

…This opponent…!

It was true she had kept her back to the moon during this battle. After all, she was a sharpshooter. It was best for her to remain above her opponent. But…

“— — — —”

She saw her shadow falling on a giant building below.

The summer sun was high in the sky. The moonlight deep in that blue sky was weak and meaningless now, but the way her shadow fell meant she had her back to the heavens.

...It's true.

She had not looked directly up at the moon.

Had that begun with this battle? No, it had not.

"I made a decision."

Honestly, she thought. *Did this opponent judge my actions and feel a meaning in them that had nothing to do with combat?*

If so...

"I made a decision."

She had done so ever since losing something precious to her.

"I decided I would only look up at the sky once I

could do so forever more."

"Wonderful," said Kagami. "And when that happens, I may never be able to look up in the sky again."

"...What?"

"Listen, Horinouchi." Without answering her question, Kagami raised her pointing finger. "Let us settle this."

The shellfire vertically linking the sky began from above.

On the back of the great bow, the spell bowstring was pulled to its limit and then released to strike the shell accelerator's hammer.

The twang of the bowstring shook the sky and ether light rippled out to a diameter of a dozen kilometers as the shell was fired.

A chorus of ringing much like a shrine's large bell shot straight down for five hundred meters. Launched by that sound and spraying light, a

massive shell was fired.

It was shaped like an arrow, it measured over four hundred meters long, and it left the great vermilion bow to pierce the sky.

The tip was enough to split the atmosphere and create an explosion of air. The arrow made of ether soared through the resultant vacuum so it could tear into the sword that had nearly approached to close range. Meanwhile, the blade had yet to complete its firing preparations.

The shell had yet to fully form, but the accelerator was filled with light.

It would fire as soon as the shell was complete, but the great bow had already launched its attack.

However, the girl on the sword's guard did not lower her raised hand.

She stared straight at the coming arrow, the great bow, the girl standing on it, the blue sky behind all that, and the moon.

“I hope it reaches.”

She did not command it to reach.

“Give me a path, wings raised toward the moon.”

Just as the great bow’s “attack” would change its name to a “hit”, the figure on the sword swung down her hand.

“Fire.”

Horinouchi saw Kagami give the order to fire far too late.

…She won’t make it in time!

The acceleration pathway was filled with light so it could fire as soon as the shell was formed, but Horinouchi’s own attack was already entering the muzzle.

She had won.

When the Magino Frame named Akerindou was fired at full power from close range, it ranked near

the very top of any Magino Frame.

She had met those conditions here.

Kagami's attack would be too late and it would be destroyed.

Horinouchi had won.

Part of her was disappointed by that, but she did not know if that was due to conceit or over this loss of the ability to admonish her current state.

"Break her, attack of Suzaku!"

With that cry, she cast a spell on the arrow. Akerindou helped pressurize it and a further acceleration spell was installed. And this was a direct installation rather than one that affected a certain range.

"Go!"

It went to break her opponent, but she heard a sound just before it did.

It was the scraping of metal and the scattering of

sparks.

...Is that...?

It was the sound of the shell formation system sending the shell into the acceleration pathway.

The cold sound came from the very back of Kagami's sword. Was she uselessly trying to fire her cannon, or...

"It can't be..."

As Horinouchi spoke, the power came.

It was a cannon firing.

The shell raced down the sword's acceleration pathway.

Horinouchi's own shell destroyed the muzzle and seemed to dig into it.

That proved to be a problem.

...Oh, no.

When it hit, the arrow bent. It was slight, but its straight trajectory was thrown ever-so-slightly off,

the pressure focused on the tip, and it swelled out. Needless to say, the vermilion arrow would then demonstrate its penetrative power, but…

“Did she time her attack to counter mine!?”

Horinouchi watched as the sword was destroyed.

Her attack should have caused it to fall apart and then split apart further down, but it had destroyed its own tip instead.

The force had come from within, and…

…I was right!

The destructive power did not just tear into Kagami’s sword.

The tip of the vermilion arrow was destroyed and it split apart as if deflected. A blue shell shot out from its center. That was the attack fired by Kagami’s Magino Frame.

She had targeted the arrow in the instant it hit as a

counterattack.

“And you slowed the formation of the shell to make a longer and skinnier compressed shell, didn’t you!?”

The straight line of power was clearly skinnier than the muzzle the arrow had struck.

Kagami’s Magino Frame was an outdated Holy Knight-style and it did not specialize in shellfire.

That must have been why she decided to compress the shell even further and build up even more acceleration.

She had filled the acceleration pathway with light ahead of time so she could charge it up with an additional acceleration spell.

…And to fine-tune it so she could fire the skinnier shell without losing stability!

Horinouchi did not think she had been conceited.

She had simply fired Akerindou in the formal fashion.

Kagami however had used any means necessary to "get back at" her.

"In that case...!"

Horinouchi did not hesitate.

She set up a barrier, using her gaze to select the empty space between Akerindou and Kagami's sword. She then cast a spatial stability spell on her own objects in that range.

She did not even think about whether she would make it in time. She simply cast the spell without looking down at her moving fingers.

"Be crushed!"

The spatial fixation also corrected the objects' shapes to supplement their own indentation.

The spell cast on the arrow returned the swelling and splitting vermilion power to its original straight line.

The arrow tore into Kagami's attack and attempted to crush it, but Horinouchi saw something in that

instant.

That something was Kagami.

The fingertip she had swung down to signal her attack was now pointing straight at Horinouchi.

“Well done.”

In that instant, the two powers between them exploded.

Both shells could not withstand the collision of power and were destroyed. This led to a massive explosion.

“Lady Mitsuru!”

Koutarou looked up at the sky where the two powers collided and collapsed.

Below the moon, vermilion and blue explosions of light were accompanied by intense noise.

Horinouchi’s Akerindou and Kagami’s sword were swallowed up by the explosions, but Kagami’s half-

destroyed Magino Frame collided with the other.

The men being healed cried out as they looked into the sky.

“The two Magino Frames…!”

They were intertwined and falling.

The sword’s blade had almost entirely broken away as it stabbed into Akerindou which had lost most of its bow shape.

“Manager!”

A transmission arrived. The spell circle had been sent from the operation room built below the Horinouchi mansion. The Horinouchi family had sent representatives to fight the Black Witch since ancient times. Just like similar families, corporations, and military organizations, it possessed a system to provide backup for those representatives.

One of the maids inside the command center spoke to him.

“Lady Mitsuru’s Magino Frame is falling!”

“I can see that! Where is it going to-…?”

“You can’t tell?”

“I-I can tell it’s generally falling to the east of Tokyo Bay, but give me the details!”

While thinking the maids were being overly strict, he recalled that they were former witches themselves. To them, Mitsuru was a memento of the previous generation and their hope.

…Ah, they’re treating me like the unneeded man!

But regardless, he held the position of manager. Not even he knew if he had anything to be proud of outside that position, but he did have his ability as a butler.

At any rate, he received the requested details.

“Northeast of Tokyo Bay…Old Makuhari!”

The bay was the best place to see the fall and

destruction.

A school was located at the center of Tokyo Bay.

As those inside scanned the two Magino Frames falling to the northeast, the school buildings had their shutters closed and a defensive spell barrier was placed in the sky above.

But despite the security measures, a few people were visible on the school buildings' rooftops.

First, there was the western building engraved with the words "Special Equipment" which was covered by a solar power system.

Next, there was the eastern building engraved with the word "Spell" which was a midair building with no entrance on the surface.

Finally, there was the northern building which was a fully floating honors building.

The people atop or in front of those buildings spoke their various thoughts.

"Horinouchi."

“So it’s finally happening.”

“Mother, this flower is finally blooming.”

Afterwards, they all returned to their duties. They turned their backs on the falling objects and looked up at the moon in the sky.

A moment later, an extremely massive quake ran through the earth at the northeast end of Tokyo Bay.

The sound resembled a solid impact or a crashing wave and it accompanied the explosion produced by a great bow and a sword.

The battle was not yet over, but…

“Has it been settled yet or not?” someone muttered.

In that moment, new lights appeared across the school.

They were spell circles. They displayed a warning, but that warning indicated a true emergency.

<Warning: Shifting into Fifth Security Mode. The Black Witch’s output has been detected.>

And that was not all.

“I can see it.”

Someone pointed it out from the spell building’s rooftop. The moon in the center of the sky was emitting light.

The Black Witch had been sealed in that moon which was beginning to act.

Koutarou spoke in response to the spell circle warnings opening here and there.

“Everyone, ensure the security and peace of your posts! Observation Team, record your observations of Lady Mitsuru and her opponent!”

“Manager! Don’t we need to observe the moon!?”

“Someone else will record the moon!”

Koutarou had a hunch.

…What did the Black Witch react to!?

That was obvious. The Black Witch’s heart had been

moved by the battle between two witches below. One of those witches was the daughter of her opponent from the previous confrontation, and the other one…

…She clearly knows the Black Witch!

The scale of their battle was not unheard of for witches, but it had progressed oddly. So…

“We will record this battle and its result!”

That was enough. After all…

“The Black Witch has shown an interest in the two of them!”

As soon as he said it, a pale light was added to the summer sunlight.

It was a heavenly light.

That light seemed to envelop the moon, it formed a ring of ether, and it took form at the moon’s north pole.

It looked small from where they were, but it was

actually large enough to form an angel's halo over the moon.

"She's watching!"

The halo spread, formed an ellipse, and circled to the back of the moon.

It almost looked like an eyeball with the moon as the pupil.

There was no escaping that massive gaze.

And that was not all.

Light gathered in front of the moon.

<Warning>

"Manager! The amount of ether detected on the lunar surface is spiking!"

It was obvious what was happening.

"The Black Witch is interfering with the seal! She's releasing her power!"

The communication officer's voice filled the air as the light in the sky trembled. The ether light gained

a shadow, grew black, and…

“It’s an arm!”

It really is, thought Koutarou. A long, slender black arm crawled out from the moon as if it to connect the sky with the falling wreckage of the two witches.

Destruction and a fall were synonymous.

Horinouchi realized the impact of her landing had vanished and that the Magino Frame had begun to destroy itself.

Akerindou’s great bow was half destroyed and it was losing its acceleration pathway for shells.

She opened a spell circle to check and saw a fatal crack in the Phlogiston Heart. It had not completely broken, but it would be unable to endure the damage and it would fall apart.

…And my mood feels about the same.

She could not continue to fight like this. That

resignation stopped the heating of her heart, but…

“The sky!”

Her Magino Frame’s armor had shattered and fallen and she could see the shards turning to light and vanishing, but beyond that, she saw a colossal eyeball floating in the heavens and she saw a slender black hand reaching its claws her way.

The black hand and arm approaching through the sky trailed black light and she could not imagine how much power it took to create something like that.

…Is that…?

She knew what it was.

It was a portion of the Black Witch’s power. It had escaped the seal and it had to be more of an illusion than anything else. If it had the physical might something that size would normally wield, it would have disturbed the space between the moon and the earth and the sky would have split open.

That was an illusion. It may have been powerful, but it was not the Black Witch's true power.

But even knowing that, a different understanding led her heart to tremble.

The Black Witch was focused on her.

She felt a chill because she recalled certain words.

...I...

I have always kept my back to the moon.

If the Black Witch had wanted, she could have suddenly grabbed Horinouchi from behind.

"_ _ _ _"

She had been naïve. Or should she say the situation had "corrected" itself. This was the sort of relationship the Black Witch and other witches were meant to have.

...Kh.

The black arm reached out quickly, earnestly, longingly. Its size had already become clear.

“It covers the sky!”

The opened hand was as wide as the moon.

It already hid the moon and the color black spread across Tokyo’s sky.

The massive fingers seemed to envelop everything and only the center of the palm could still be seen from here.

The fingers had surpassed Japan and were likely darkening the area from the central Pacific to Eastern Europe.

Horinouchi wondered what she could even do.

“Horinouchi!!”

She heard a voice.

She turned to her right and saw someone familiar rushing her way.

It was Kagami Kagami. The girl’s Magino Form was even more broken than Horinouchi’s, but she directly observed the other girl.

“Is your Phlogiston Heart still active!?”

Her voice filled the air.

“I wish to borrow your power!”

Horinouchi did not understand what was happening, but she felt an odd sense of trust in the voice she heard.

She had been fighting this enemy not long before. The girl had unknown origins, had opposed her for unknown reasons, and had harmed people close to her.

But they had the same objective.

...And this person...

Even now, she did not look away from the moon.

Had there ever been someone like this? Every ten years, this world experienced Hexennacht, which might as well have been a ritual sacrifice, yet this girl stared fearlessly into the sky even as the Black

Witch's power approached.

"Horinouchi!"

She reached out her hand, her power arm. She had already arrived right in front of Horinouchi.

"What are you going to do?"

"That is simple."

Kagami swung her arms outward.

"I must strike her!"

Horinouchi knew what Kagami was going to do. She had seen the girl do it several times already.

The power of this witch named Kagami Kagami was most likely of the craft-style, which used some kind of special technique. The other witches used a ritual process to draw ether from the ley lines and form motors and armor from it.

...But she can suddenly "grab" the ether and "process" it.

The word "creation" may have been the closest

match, but it was not an impossible technique. Some witches would improve themselves through divine protection and modifications, essentially turning their very existence into a spell.

However, that all came from their own spells and it reduced and heated the ether they possessed.

This girl was different.

There had not been an ether reading from the very beginning. That had not changed even now. Not only was it low for a witch, she had less than a normal person. Nevertheless, she could grab and process ether far more quickly than Horinouchi.

“I wish to borrow your power.”

How could she sound so confident?

Horinouchi did not understand.

There was so much here she did not understand.

But she could trust in herself. She had reached Rank #4 and became the Eastern Japanese representative because she had never allowed herself to be shaken.

Then, she thought. *I will trust in what I've seen.*

The girl in front of her could process ether and she could strategize. Horinouchi was not sure she could say this girl was her equal, but their battle had ended in a draw.

So...

"Suzaku!"

The servant must have been exhausted because it was sitting cross-legged in the spell circle on her shoulder.

...Are you really a bird?

She sometimes wondered that, but she let it slide since there was no real meaning in saying otherwise. She felt that was the adult thing to do. Anyway, the Suzaku seemed to have understood what she was thinking.

<Magino Frame: Release Portion of Structure>

<Warning: Releasing a portion of the structure will accelerate collapse of Phlogiston Heart. 15 Seconds.>

“I will lend you my power!”

Instead of leaving her Magino Frame to fall apart, she returned it to ether on her own. That would indeed be a source of power for Kagami who could process ether.

However…

“There’s no time!”

“I am aware.” Kagami smiled back over her shoulder. “You have my thanks.”

Koutarou realized he had made the right decision.

“Manager!”

One of the observers pointed at the opposite shore of Tokyo Bay rather than the black hand grabbing at them from the sky.

“Lady Mitsuru and her opponent’s Magino Frames are fusing!!”

He could see it about twenty-five kilometers away.

Despite that great distance, the five hundred meter structure rose tall in his vision.

“Ohh…”

The air shook from the shrine bell-like ringing of Akerindou’s motors and the church bell-like ringing of Kagami’s sword.

The two sounds never joined together. They simply travelled solemnly and separately through the air.

Then the two Magino frames took a single form.

The sword was at the center and the great bow extended horizontally from the guard.

The weapon resembled both a bow gun and a great sword, but it was over a kilometer long.

“Could that…?”

Koutarou started speaking, but then shook his head.

“That cannot catch up to her mother.”

He swallowed the word “yet” and shouted to the others.

“Look!”

He listened to the ringing of the two types of bells and looked into the sky.

The five extended black fingers may have already reached the exosphere. They were beginning to gain a coloration closer to blue than black. The palm seemed to rapidly distort and expand due to the atmosphere’s lensing effect, and…

“After ten years, the Horinouchi family’s strike will reach the Black Witch!”

His shout was immediately followed by the world shaking.

The kilometer long cannon had fired its full power into the sky.

The recoil could not be buffered.

The shockwave of the blast created electrical discharges in the sky over a radius of several dozen kilometers and the ruined buildings to the north and

east of Tokyo Bay were swept and blasted away.

As the wreckage flew into the air, stabbed into other ruins, and spread destruction as they rolled, the pressure of the blast itself shook the bay.

The bottom of the bay came into view along the coast of Makuhari on the northeastern end of the vast body of water.

The mud, sand, and the base of the broken manmade islands and reclaimed land were revealed wet in the sunlight and the water swelled outward.

The sound was not that of waves.

The water itself was compressed and seawater twisted and roared up from below the swelling ocean surface. It sounded a lot like the creaking of a ship.

In the center of the bay, Shihouin Academy reacted most quickly to the movement and noise. The academy's defense system had already activated defense spells, but it now erected barrier walls

which rose from the ocean to stop the coming tsunami. While sending warnings to the coast, their defense system sent barriers out as far into the ocean as it could to break the waves. This was only possible due to the relatively shallow depth of Tokyo Bay and the school also contacted U.A.H.J. and an organization founded by influential families such as the Horinouchi family and by the municipal office of reconstructed Yokohama. They cast wide-range spells to stop the waves on the coast and to secure and reinforce the waterways needed to allow the tsunami's water to escape.

Also...

<Warning: Shockwave will arrive in 7 seconds.>

It felt like a physical blow.

From east to west, it transformed the tsunami into a massive amount of ocean spray.

That was the might of the explosive blast. It split the ocean open as a rapid vibration, turned to rain, and...

“...!”

The eastern windows on the coastal buildings shook and some cracked.

But everyone saw a certain sight through those windows or above their lowered heads.

In the center of the heavens above, an attack flew from the skyward-aimed sword bow.

“Oh...”

It pierced through the black hand trying to envelop the entire world.

It flew in a straight line.

As if to show just how defenseless the spread fingers of the black arm were, the shot of light pierced through it up to the elbow.

The destruction came afterwards.

The forearm was the first to scatter. The area a bit above the wrist swelled out from within and burst

like splitting bark.

The rest was simple.

As the destruction raced up to the elbow, the wrist and hand were left in the sky, seemingly forgotten. They lost their strength, but they were not forgiven.

The hole in the palm spread from the other side and the fingers thrust outwards at crooked angles.

Then it finally collapsed.

It vanished in an instant.

Pale ether light shaped like an arm scattered in the heavens and finally disappeared.

The destruction from earth seemed to stop when it reached the upper arm, but the arm no longer functioned and that was enough.

It all vanished toward the moon and only the eye ring remained around the moon.

But that too gathered together as if narrowing.

“It’s vanishing!”

By the time the people stood up, threw open their windows or ran from their homes, and cheered, the black sky had vanished.

All that remained was the moon floating in the summer sky. And…

“Where’s the witch’s blade!?”

They all turned toward eastern Tokyo Bay.

By then, nothing remained. There were no rain clouds in the sky, but a salty rain fell. The approach of the tsunami left some of the coastal areas soaked and the receding waves roared through the waterways.

Everyone was seeing and experiencing a temporary change, but nothing remained in the sky or on the earth.

“What was that?”

The next thing they knew, the rain had passed and everything was back to normal.

“Okay.”

Horinouchi checked on the situation as she heard Kagami’s voice and saw the other girl lower her shoulders.

The Magino Frame had vanished and they stood on the roof of an abandoned building. Only the blue sky and white moon could be seen above and the waves below had returned to the bottom of the bay. They were picking up speed, rolling the underwater wreckage and stones around and crashing against the ruins.

The underwater structures moved and crashed together and the ocean produced a kind of white noise as it tried to expel the air it had taken in.

She heard distant sirens from the opposite coast.

Their attack had caused secondary damages.

…We aren’t that much different from the Black Witch.

But the Horinouchi family, U.A.H.J., and other countermeasure organizations seemed to be

functioning properly. The coastal areas were allowing the waves to escape and temporarily accumulate in the ruins and the only obvious damage being reported was broken windows from the shockwave. Of course, some of the shrines and temples near the coast had their ether tanks burst due to the backflow of their ether capacity support systems.

However, Horinouchi was focused on something else. The magic circle containing praise from Koutarou was crushed by the praise coming from the maids in the command center, but she ignored that.

...Kagami Kagami.

She had distinctly heard something during the cannon blast.

When the black arm had been destroyed and the moon had been revealed, that girl had spoken.

“I finally found you, Shouko!”

Shouko?

Who was that? No, more importantly…

…Who are you?

Horinouchi did not know, so she focused on what she could see before her.

“＿＿＿＿”

Kagami’s entire body wobbled unsteadily. At the same time, she released her Magino Form and returned to her suit.

She was falling. No, collapsing.

It may have been exhaustion or the release of her tension, but Horinouchi had also lost her Magino Form.

She now wore her school uniform.

“Wait!”

She tried to catch Kagami by the back and shoulders and found she was surprisingly light. So as not to hold her too tightly, she supported her by wrapping

an arm around her.

“You…”

A white and blue dragon servant stood at their feet.

Horinouchi remembered that she had helped with the experiments concerning that servant. She had had high hopes for it, but when the decision had been made to dispose of it as a failure, she had arranged a certain plan after taking the final readings.

She had made sure the lock spell would release if the servant wished to be free.

She could not let it just wait in its cage to be disposed of. That was hypocritical considering how the other servants like that had been treated, but when there was a connection to her…

…I remember.

After her mother had lost and died, she had heard some people lamenting.

Mankind had meant to seal away the Black Witch, but they had actually surrounded themselves by her cage where they simply waited to be killed.

Horinouchi had not wanted the servant to be in the same situation.

She had been looking down on the creature as she had granted it the right to live and die as it pleased, but she had also had a certain thought.

If she could end Hexennacht during this generation, that would no longer be hypocritical.

And so she had promised herself she would do just that.

But she had not expected the servant to choose the western ruins as its escape route. She had assumed it would go east, away from the danger and the people, but some part of its subconscious may have felt a connection to people. She had sent her tracking spell to the west, so she had ultimately caused Koutarou some trouble.

...But...

"Wait!"

It may have only been a small fraction, but she had torn into the Black Witch's power with this girl she had met after all that.

Had she done the right thing? And if so...

...I...

Wondering what would happen, she looked to the person she could ask.

"_ _ _ _ _"

She held her in her arms and looked to her face.

..."I finally found you"?

There had been no resentment in her voice. It had only contained anger towards something. And it had not been a simple rebuke. It had likely been a mixture of several different thoughts.

But...

"What does this mean?"

There was a slight smile on the unconscious girl's face, but who could say if it was just the relaxing of her muscles as she passed out or if it was an expression of her emotions. Horinouchi still understood nothing.

"Who are you?"

She heard the beating of the air in the distance as Koutarou's helicopter came to retrieve them.

Chapter 7: The Morning Sun Rises

Chapter 7

“The Morning Sun Rises”

Look up at

The bright sun

Music could be heard.

The morning air warmed as the sun rose. It may have been summer, but the air was still and calm this early in the morning. And that clear air contained music.

“What is this? The American national anthem?”

A few people in track suits stepped out onto the roof and the girl they found there answered them.

“I’m about to have a match, so I want to focus.”

“Oh, sorry. Are we interrupting?”

The few who had arrived started back inside, but the girl raised a hand to stop them.

“You’ll make things more difficult for me if you do that. As the representative of the special equipment division, I represent all of you, so it’ll be more

difficult for me if you treat me differently. After all…"

She swept aside the red hair falling just above her shoulder.

"America represents the world and its strength can reach any part of that world."

"Oh, oh. How reliable."

"Yeah, I suppose."

The girl smiled bitterly and let the music play. The magic circle by her hand contained an acoustic spell which produced the music of a live orchestra.

The song was the American national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner".

—Oh, say can you see by the dawn's early light

—What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming?

—Whose broad stripes and bright stars thru the perilous fight,

—O'er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming?

—And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air

—Gave proof thru the night that our flag was still there.

—Oh, say does that star-spangled banner yet wave

—O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

"I don't understand much of the English, but it sure does sound cool."

"I'm glad to hear that. When I first heard my dad performing this, I was too young to know what it meant either." The girl looked at the others. "But are you all okay?"

"If you're talking about the pre-summer break assignment, then we took care of yours as well, special equipment representative. But if we aren't treating you differently, you'll fail if you fall behind

on your homework."

"Doing mine for me isn't treating me differently?"

"In the special equipment division, we take care of each other. No matter where in the world they are or who they are, as long as they're one of us, we'll treat them the same. It would be a problem for us all if someone was dragging us down, so we won't let that happen."

"Thanks," said the girl.

And…

"Oh, say does that star-spangled banner yet wave

"O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?"

The special equipment building's rooftop was covered in a solar power system and the students who had spent the night in the building working had gathered there to get some of the morning's fresh air. Some light exercise was a daily ritual of the girls and more and more people had ended up joining in.

Today, she smiled at the front of the group.

“Oh, honestly.”

She looked back toward the western coast of Tokyo Bay.

A few different areas there were covered in metal scaffolding and the sounds of construction could already be heard.

The previous day’s large-scale battle and its after effects had put a large burden on some of the embankments and flood gates. They had spells and divine protection, but physical reinforcement would strengthen it all and increase the number of hooks for adding in divine protection.

“Oh? Are those our first years?”

“Some of them went to help with the construction. They made several ridiculous requests such as making it baroque or like Todai-ji, so who knows what kind of flood gate they’re going to end up with.”

The girl responded to that with a small smile and stretched a little.

“Now, then.”

She pulled her arm back toward her side and then thrust it forward.

“I’m going to be aiming a little higher, so it’s time I did what I need to do.”

Horinouchi did not like the headmaster’s office.

It was not a simple sort of dislike; it was a complicated kind. And that was especially true today.

First of all, its location was a problem. It and the other teacher’s officers could have been in one of the school buildings, but they were instead located in the library on the northeast end of the school grounds.

The library was another problem. It was divided between normal books and reference books, so one

category was naturally larger and the library had been built in a pyramid shape to accommodate that. The teacher's offices were inside that building, so when someone said they were visiting a teacher's office, a few people would always make a triangular gesture above their head and ask, "You mean here?"

The Middle Eastern witches in particular would insist that it provided "pyramid power" and would therefore keep flowers from withering, so perhaps the headmaster had designed it to keep herself from aging.

The headmaster herself was yet another problem. After all...

...She worked with my mother.

The three witches who had competed for the representative spot during the previous Hexennacht were known as the Three Sages and the headmaster was one of them.

Horinouchi's mother had ultimately been the representative, but Horinouchi had of course been

born at that point and the headmaster was the only person in the school who had known her since she was a child.

She found the headmaster was the only person here that she could not take the initiative with.

And there was another problem with the headmaster's office unique to today.

...What in the world is going on?

She could not help but wonder why she was standing in the headmaster's office with this person.

It was Kagami Kagami.

She and that girl in a suit stood facing the headmaster.

"Now, then. ...Miss Kagami, was it? Did you have a good night's sleep?"

Kagami nodded while ignoring the silent glare Horinouchi was giving her.

A woman with glasses sat in front of her. Her semi-long hair was of a foreign color and she appeared to be in her early thirties, but as a witch, her appearance was not necessarily a reliable indicator of her age. However, Kagami did sense an indistinct aura coming from the woman.

...Should I call it a mystical aura?

She did not know the rules here. There were some things only she noticed and some things the others noticed as well, so she decided to set aside the headmaster's aura for the moment.

"I did. Thank you very much, Lady Headmaster."

"You don't need to call me 'lady'."

"You have a thin handkerchief in your breast pocket, so I figured you had once worn a badge there."

The headmaster flicked lightly at the handkerchief on her chest.

“This is…”

She smiled bitterly.

“…due to some old mischief.”

Horinouchi gave a blatant sigh, so there must have been a connection there. Regardless, the headmaster opened a magic circle with the hand she had used to flick the handkerchief.

The display had a floral shape.

“Anyway, this is the bill for using our dorms last night.”

“I would expect nothing less.”

“Now, now. To be honest, some witches are forceful enough to use their spatial teleportation to get out of paying, so I’m thankful you actually answered my invitation. Oh, and one other thing.”

She narrowed her eyes and threw another floral

magic circle toward Horinouchi.

Horinouchi tilted her head and tried to avoid it.

“You don’t need to be that cruel,” said the headmaster with a bitter smile in her voice.

She pulled back her hand and the magic circle stopped next to Horinouchi’s face.

“What is this? Headmaster, could you tell me what you want before throwing things at me? It would be a real pain if it was a bomb, you know?”

“That’s for Koutarou. I had him get me some root vegetable seeds from Mount Kouya a while back and they have produced some lovely flowers, so I can send him back even more than he gave me.”

“Why can’t you send this to him directly?”

The headmaster placed a hand on her cheek, sighed, and shook her head.

“I just have no idea how to communicate with teenagers these days.”

It amused Kagami how much Horinouchi's upper lip twisted, but the girl blushed as soon as she noticed Kagami watching.

"Wh-what are you looking at?"

"Oh, I just thought it was interesting that you too can give people looks like that."

"That's right, Miss Kagami. Miss Horinouchi is a lot cuter than she looks, so please take good care of her."

"I will make sure to do so."

They both ignored the voice yelling "do what!?", but it still created a break in the conversation. The tension had already faded, so...

"Lady Headmaster."

This seemed as good a time as any, so Kagami folded up the bill, placed it in her breast pocket, and spoke.

"To put it simply, I have come from another world."

...She just said something odd!!

She's really done it now! thought Horinouchi. *What even is "another world"? What kind of made-up story is this?*

But...

"Yes, that happens sometimes, Miss Kagami."

"Headmaster!? You believe her!?"

"Witches can come from anywhere. And Miss Horinouchi, how about we move onto you?"

Only then did Horinouchi remember that she had been called here along with Kagami.

It made no sense to her. If it was to inform her that her rank had changed, why summon Kagami as well? That girl seemed to have a way of ruining Horinouchi's usual pace, but listening to the headmaster made it sound like Kagami was the main topic here, so...

"By the way, headmaster! Why am I here, too!?"

“Well,” said the headmaster. “Miss Kagami here may not belong to our school, but she still defeated you. I was wondering what to do about your change in rank.”

…You’re announcing my demotion in front of the person who defeated me?

Her pride did not like that at all, so she spoke up before the others could say anything more.

“I don’t mind if you lower me to 5th.”

That meant a drop in rank.

She had definitely lost the previous day’s match. It was being treated as a draw and there was probably some truth to that, but…

“Kagami is an outside witch with no preparation while I have the training and standards of a ranker.”

Their shells had cancelled each other out at the end of the match, but that was all the proof she needed.

Her own had been more powerful, but Kagami had found a way to respond. Horinouchi had also hurried

and responded, but…

“I was a step behind. If you look past the result and focus on the flow of events and the momentum, then I was the clear loser. I have no objection to a drop in rank.”

“Please wait,” said Kagami with a tilt of the head. “I do not care about the ranks. As long as I can defeat the Black Witch, nothing else matters.”

“Weren’t you listening?”

How ignorant of the rules is she? Do I really have to say this here? No, I’m pretty sure I said it yesterday too, so has she already forgotten?

“Only one witch can challenge the Black Witch on Hexennacht!”

Kagami gave the headmaster a questioning look and the woman nodded.

“Allow me to explain.” She placed a hand on her chin. “Yes, that’s more or less how it works.”

“That is not an explanation!”

“Horinouchi, being too nitpicky is bad for your mental health.”

“That is none of your business!”

“I see.” Kagami waved a hand back and forth and bowed toward Horinouchi. “So I got in the way of your ambitions. I apologize.”

“That’s called the arrogance of a winner.”

Kagami raised her head with a corner of her mouth lightly raised.

“That is just who I am.”

...This girl.

While Horinouchi mentally clenched her teeth, the headmaster smiled and clapped her hands once.

“Okay,” she said. “Miss Kagami, your abilities look promising and you don’t seem to have any relatives, so I would like to invite you to join our academy.”

“Ehhhh!?”

“Yes, that seems like an excellent decision.”

“Ehhhh!?”

“Heh heh. I am glad to hear it, Miss Kagami. Yes.”

“Ehhhh!?”

“Indeed. I am glad to have a stable home close to others who understand me.”

“Um, is it just me or are you two completely ignoring me!?”

At some point, Kagami had walked up next to her and she placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Uh… I look forward to working with you, Horinouchi…”

Kagami looked up at the ceiling before looking back at Horinouchi with a smile.

“Horinouchi Manko.”[2]

“My name is not Manko!”

She was afraid that would stick.

“Head Butler…or wait, are you acting as manager at the moment? Anyway, Lady Mitsuru has a message for you from the headmaster.”

“Yes, I am acting as the former at the moment. What is the message about?”

Koutarou fixed his suit’s collar. If it was not an emergency, he would have any message inspected at the command center first. It could be an annoyance, but he felt it was safer and took the pressure off of his master when she returned home.

…It is not good to live a rushed life.

That was his opinion as someone in a position that had served the Horinouchi family for generations. And in the mansion hall, the maid opened a magic circle to perform a double safety check.

“It is thanks for the seeds you provided her. Um…”

The maid summarized the contents.

“She wishes to invite Kagami – the witch who fought Lady Mitsuru – to the academy, so she wants the

Horinouchi family to vouch for her. Also, a ranker cannot exactly stay in the dorms and there is an empty room in Lady Mitsuru's living space, so she wants us to prepare it for that Kagami girl without asking Lady Mitsuru's permission. Finally, Lady Mitsuru will be showing Kagami around the academy, so she wants you to provide assistance."

"What does that have to do with thanking me for the seeds!?"

"That was what Lady Mitsuru said it was about when she forwarded the message."

Before the maid had even finished her explanation, Koutarou had dashed out of the hall.

"I need to hurry to the academy! Check Lady Mitsuru's movements via GPS! I need to be there waiting for her!"

"Head Butler, what about dinner?"

"I will stop at a convenience store on the way!"

"Then we'll just do whatever," said the maids as he

left them behind and pulled a car key from his pocket.

He had to hurry. After all...

"The Head Butler of the Horinouchi family must be there before his master needs him!"

"Anyway, school is already out for the day, so I'll show you around the academy real quick."

Horinouchi chose the path they would take. If she was to give a simple tour of Shihouin Academy, there was only one real option.

...*Down the center*.

They first circled northward from the northeastern library.

"That floating school building to the north is for the honors division. It's for those with abilities that don't fit into the other divisions or those with exceptional power. Their lessons are mostly individualized guidance."

But the two of them did not go there. A flower garden was located below the honors building and some students were tending to it, but…

“The powers of honors witches can be harder to use and they tend to be sharply focused in one direction, but you can think of them as the highest ranked division. However, when you look at the ranker ratios, their exceptional abilities make it easier to hit them with countermeasures, so very few of them make it to the higher levels.”

“But the initial attack works well, doesn’t it?”

Horinouchi could only agree with Kagami.

“Yes. The ones with more difficult countermeasures rise the farthest and they are only ever defeated because of the people who essentially act as ‘sacrifices’ until the countermeasure is ready.”

Horinouchi was one of those who stood atop that foundation. She did not look down on herself or pride herself for that fact. Tactics based on a system always came with rules.

At any rate, she chose to take the southward path. That route would cut across the school grounds from north to south.

It was also a path that she liked quite a bit. After all…

“Horinouchi, I see the center of the school has been made into a courtyard and nature park. Is that how witches do things?”

“Yes. It provides a place to focus your mind, to cultivate catalysts, and for the spirits to rest.”

And when the trees formed a roof overhead, something else could be glimpsed past them.

Tall structures were visible in every direction.

“Shihouin Academy has split its school building into the four cardinal directions. To the south is the general division, to the west is the special equipment division, to the east is the spell division, and to the north is the honors division.”

They passed by a few people. Horinouchi did not know if people were focused on her or if Kagami

stood out in her suit, but the people stretched out on the grass and the people sitting in the trees holding brooms all looked their way. But she paid them no heed.

“The top four world witch rankings are each a part of one of those school buildings. I am #4 and essentially the representative of the general division.”

“I see,” replied Kagami. “Then I just have to defeat the higher ranks with you.”

“What?”

“From what I heard, there is also a buddy system. If you join up with me, things should be a lot easier, don’t you think?”

“Stop deciding things for me!”

Horinouchi was reminded of when she had been forced to say goodbye to her mother.

When it came to a battle, one could be lost no matter how powerful they were. Battles between normal

witches followed certain rules and someone could step in if there was any danger, but that was not true for a battle with the Black Witch. With the buddy system, one's mistake could mean losing their partner or vice versa, so…

"I fight on my own."

Kagami immediately gave a dignified nod and held out a hand to stop Horinouchi.

"————"

Kagami moved only her gaze to look around.

Horinouchi understood.

This was the courtyard. The students who had begun their afterschool training had grown silent and had taken fighting stances.

They were prepared to challenge Horinouchi at any moment.

The previous day's battle had left her Suzaku exhausted.

...I could probably summon my Magino Frame, but a full-on battle would be difficult.

However, these students were not about to overlook that. Not to mention that Horinouchi had shot back at the Black Witch. If these other students were to defeat her...

"I take it they are looking for an opening so they can defeat us and improve their rank," said Kagami without bothering to whisper. "Wonderful. If everyone here can unify their hearts like this, then I look forward to when we can settle this."

She began to walk in a random direction and tapped Horinouchi on the shoulder.

"Where can I get a good view?"

"To the south. If we pass through the general school building and leave through the front, we will reach a pier."

"Then let's go there," said Kagami with her back still turned. "This is a nice place and I have something to

tell you, Horinouchi."

"Head Butler! The target is moving south! Most likely to the pier!"

"Ehhh!? Wait! Didn't you just say she was headed west to the cafeteria!? Now I have to make a half circuit of the road around the academy!"

"Quite complaining and get going, Head Butler. You're a man, aren't you? If you delay Lady Mitsuru even a second, every last maid is going to greet you with fake smiles tomorrow."

"Gender equality! I demand gender equality!"

Chapter 8: People Have Tears

Chapter 8

“People Have Tears”

The words of an infinitely small fraction
Are given to the sunset

The words of an infinitely small fraction

Are given to the sunset

The pier was empty.

Normally, the water-element witches would rest and hold their afterschool training there.

Their ships and floats were absent now, but that had to be due to the previous day.

...The ley lines in the water must still be disturbed.

Any training on the sea would have to wait until after the water had fundamentally calmed down. That meant the pool was likely crowded. She reminded herself that the pool was located between the general and special equipment buildings, but then...

...Wh-why am I still thinking like a tour guide!?

She looked forward and saw Kagami walking below the setting sun.

She passed through the decorative gate to the pier and walked along the wooden tile floor. Horinouchi followed five steps behind Kagami while feeling the movement of the waves in the soles of her feet.

“I want you to listen to something. Think of it as a nonsense story.”

Kagami began speaking without warning and did not give Horinouchi a chance to say anything.

“Once, in a world different from this one, there were two sisters.”

Only then was there a pause.

Feeling she was being invited to ask, Horinouchi spoke the question on her mind.

“What do you mean?”

Kagami claimed to be from another world. Horinouchi found it hard to believe, but the girl was clearly talking about herself here. And that she had a sister was of course new information.

“How about I give you a better understanding?”

Kagami had her back turned, but Horinouchi heard a bitter laugh and more words.

“There was no magic in that world.”

“...What?”

“You don’t believe me?”

It was not so much that she did not believe her than it was that she did not understand.

If there was no magic, did that mean there was no ether, no spells, and no divine protection? If so...

“What did they use for fuel and on what was the value of currency based? In fact, what kind of civilization could there have-...”

“Sadly, you can chalk that up to a lack of imagination. That world did not look all that different from this one.”

But there still had to have been a major difference on a fundamental level.

Of course, Kagami probably understood that. She

spread her arms a little before continuing.

“Because of that and because the younger of the sisters was quite frail, the two of them enjoyed imagining *a world that had everything*.”

As for how…

“They expressed it in pictures and writing. The younger sister dreamed of being an author, so she began searching through the materials in the back of her mansion.”

“Materials?”

That probably meant she had looked around for history books and other reference materials for writing a book. There were similar people in Horinouchi’s class. In those girls’ case, their drawings and text became spells, but they said it was difficult to balance faithfulness to the reference materials with their own creativity. But in Kagami’s case…

“Their father was a collector and, one day, they

found something."

"What was it?"

"The Book of Creation."

Kagami placed her hands on her hips after reaching the end of the pier.

"It was not that our world never had magic."

In other words...

"Magic was deemed dangerous, so all the world's magic was concentrated into a single book."

"And that was the Book of Creation?"

All she did was ask questions, but Horinouchi's curiosity had been piqued.

What if all of this world's magic were gathered together?

She had never imagined something like that before, but something like it had once been in Kagami's grasp.

...I-I'm starting to believe her!

Well, it's just a play on words. Yes, that's how I need to think of it.

But Kagami must have understood what she was thinking.

"You do not need to know what the book contained."

After all…

"It gave physical form to its owner's imagination and linked that physical form to itself."

Kagami noticed that Horinouchi was not reacting to what she had said.

…Honestly, what a clever girl.

She had likely directly grasped what Kagami was trying to say.

And after taking a few breaths, Kagami heard Horinouchi's voice behind her.

"It gives physical form to its owner's imagination? If you had a ridiculous artifact like that, you could

become a god!"

"Yes." Kagami crossed her arms and gathered strength in her hands. "A great many worlds were created."

They truly were, she thought to herself. *They were definitely crated in the space one could call "the palm of your hand".*

If one wished for it, countless worlds could be made in any form they wanted and those worlds would be as accessible as the other side of a small door.

Thinking back, it had been an entrancing and dangerous game. After all, to establish the worlds they created...

"Countless lives were created, lived, clashed when they grew in number, reached a mutual understanding, and lived once more."

But there was more she had to say.

"Due to her illness, the younger sister constantly felt the shadow of death."

“You mean…”

Yes.

“That may have been why each world obeyed the younger sister’s imagination and was destroyed.”

“Wait.”

“What is it?”

After her question, additional words reached her from behind.

“What happened to the older sister?” asked Horinouchi. “If the younger sister began destroying the created worlds, what happened to the older sister?”

Horinouchi looked to Kagami’s back.

The girl had her arms crossed and her sides slowly tensed at Horinouchi’s question. Strength filled the hands holding her arms in place and it looked like she was restraining her own body.

Kagami began with a sigh.

“The older sister was trapped in the expansion of the worlds and she had some authority over the worlds she created with her sister, although not as much authority as that sister. So she traveled across those many worlds to stop her sister, but…”

But…

“She did not make it in time,” she said. “And so I will defeat my sister.”

With that announcement, Horinouchi understood. She understood Kagami’s questions during the battle the day before, her joy when looking up at the moon, and her anger when firing that final shot.

…Her younger sister is the Black Witch!?

“Ha ha,” quietly laughed Kagami. “Listen.”

“Wh-what is it?”

“If her imagination of death will destroy this world, then I will stop her and end this even if it means killing her.”

“— — — —”

Horinouchi could not say a thing.

She too had a starting point: ten years before when she lost her mother. She was where she was now because she had chosen her path as a witch to wipe away what she had felt back then and to make sure no one else would ever feel that way.

She did not want to lose anything and she did not want anyone else to lose anything, but…

…This girl…

She was prepared to lose something out of necessity.

That conflicted with Horinouchi, but Horinouchi was at a loss for words regardless.

That was partially due to what she had been told, but she had also noticed something in Kagami’s words.

Horinouchi did not want to lose anything or for anyone else to lose anything, but…

...If I kill the Black Witch, that will mean I am losing "her".

The Black Witch was an enemy. She was both Horinouchi's enemy and the world's enemy. Going easy on her would mean a repeat of what had happened to them ten years before.

But Horinouchi's starting point contained a contradiction all the same.

Part of that came from not knowing the Black Witch's identity. She had thought of her as something like a natural disaster that could never be defeated no matter what. But...

"Horinouchi."

Kagami turned around with a smile in her eyes.

"Did you actually believe all that?"

"Wh-what is that supposed to mean!?"

She felt like it had all slipped away from her.

It felt like all of her thoughts had been for nothing

and it embarrassed her. She had thought too much about this other girl even though her standard policy was to avoid empathizing with others if at all possible. Her loss would be too painful otherwise, but so much of this information had been completely unexpected.

“Oh?”

Kagami looked behind her.

“You are the one from yesterday.”

“Eh?”

Horinouchi looked back and saw Koutarou at the end of the pier. He bowed.

“Lady Mitsuru, dinner is ready.”

“Whaaaaaat!? Head Butler! It’s still evening! What is this about dinner!?”

“Whaaaaat!? Lady Mitsuru is going to be spending the night in her school residence, and just how long

would it take you to make dinner and carry it over to herrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!?"

"D-don't think I'll forget this, Head Butler! When you get back, I'll curse you!"

"I can't exactly laugh that off when you're an actual witch!"

Kagami followed Horinouchi as the girl walked back down the pier in a huff.

The butler named Koutarou then stepped between them. He seemed to be communicating with someone using a simple magic circle, but he closed it and bowed.

Kagami bowed back, but...

"Are you fine with this?"

"Are talking about what happened yesterday? While we work with U.A.H.J., our actions are based on different standards."

“So it is up to Horinouchi? …But it would seem she does not like me very much.”

“That is not true.” He shook his head. “When she is in a bad mood, Lady Mitsuru hides what she truly thinks.”

With that said, his expression changed. He was glancing over at her from the side, but he was definitely looking at her.

“If I and the rest of the Horinouchi Group had been providing backup during that battle, Lady Mitsuru would not have fallen behind.”

“That sounds promising.”

“I am honored you think so. Personally, I would like for you to be Lady Mitsuru’s ally.”

“You get to the point quickly.”

“Yes.” Koutarou nodded. “I am sure you understand, but Lady Mitsuru is doing her best. …That said, progress is being made in the analysis of the compression technology used for unlocking the seal

on Hexennacht and, now that the buddy system has been introduced, the other rankers will be pairing up while receiving support on a national level. Lady Mitsuru has been working hard to face all that alone as the head of the Horinouchi family."

"As the head of the family?"

Kagami had more or less realized that, but it was a difficult subject to openly ask her about.

Realizing she was still soft, Kagami remembered that the best person to ask stood before her. This person could decide whether she should or should not be given that information about Horinouchi.

"Koutarou, this is an awkward question, but what happened to her parents?"

"The previous generation passed away at a young age. Her mother..."

Koutarou gave a silent bow before continuing quietly.

"Her mother was lost as the participant in the

previous Hexennacht."

So I was right, thought Kagami.

Even here, something that should not have been lost had been lost.

But Koutarou was not finished speaking.

"However, I believe she was fortunate that she at least had a chance to say goodbye."

After stepping off of the pier, Horinouchi realized the other two were still halfway down the pier.

...They're probably talking about me.

She felt she was being overly self-conscious, but Koutarou could take his support of her a little too far. She could guess he was trying to recruit Kagami. She felt it was none of his business, but she was also thankful. That was why she did not stop them. Instead...

"Hurry up, you two!"

But as she turned back, she noticed something.

As Kagami stood halfway down the pier, there were powerless tears spilling from her eyes.

...What?

Everything was a surprise with that girl and Horinouchi never understood what was going on.

“Wh-what is it now?”

But by then, Kagami must have noticed her tears because she wiped them away with a hand.

“Sorry. You may find it rude, but I asked about your mother.”

“Koutarou!”

Koutarou bowed deeply. It was a pose that showed he knew he had been impolite but still felt no remorse. She had known him long enough to know that, so she said what she needed to tell Kagami instead.

“You did not need to do that, but I am not someone to

pity."

"I do not pity you."

Kagami's eyes were still damp, but she raised her eyebrows.

"It saddens me that it was in a world we created that you lost your mother and were filled with sadness." She breathed in. "I have power, so if I had not erred, I could have written a story of happiness for your family."

When she heard that, Horinouchi realized that Kagami was telling the truth.

...Ah.

She did not know how much of a product of that girl and her sister they were. Based on what she had said, they had likely only created the overall "world" and had not been directly involved in creating the individuals. Perhaps they had only thought of certain stories that occurred there.

However, if they had done everything right, then

Horinouchi would have been living happily with her mother and everyone else.

“But…it’s far too late for that.”

“Yes.” Kagami placed a hand on her shoulder. “It is far too late. And that is why I have something to tell you.”

That was…

“Well done getting through it all, Manko.”

“I told you to stop calling me that!”

She suddenly realized Kagami was smiling. She thought that girl’s expression changed too much, but she too had shown a variety of expressions that day, although more on the exasperation and annoyance side of things.

…I can’t stand this.

She sighed and let her shoulders droop.

“You don’t have anywhere to eat dinner or to spend the night, do you? Then you can come to my-…”

As soon as Horinouchi said that, Kagami's expression changed again.

...What?

A moment later, the hand on her shoulder gave a tug as if pulling her down and it threw off her balance.

She pitched forward and was spun back behind Kagami.

"Lady Mitsuru!"

Horinouchi could not even respond to Koutarou's call as she straightened back up.

She did not know why she had suddenly been pulled down, but...

...That sound!

She heard a metallic sound behind her.

When she turned around, she saw something there.

It was a green wall and it was large enough to seemingly cover the entire sky.

“Is this…?”

Kagami’s right hand was held toward the sky. A defense spell magic circle and a shield of light had formed there. They were quite powerful.

Horinouchi knew what it was that girl was using her full strength to support.

“A Magino Device!?”

Koutarou recognized the Magino Device.

It was an aircraft-type that looked like a rectangular block standing vertically with armor panels covering it.

It was impressive that Kagami could support the five hundred meter device. After all, she stood on a pier, so the earth would not receive the enemy’s weight. She had put together an impromptu reinforcement spell to fill the space between her feet and the bottom of the sea.

...She is familiar with the battlefield!

With that thought, Koutarou looked up.

A Magino Device had suddenly appeared and made a physical strike.

...This is...

As soon as he decided he needed to tell her, Horinouchi gave a shout.

"This is the Rank 3 witch from the special equipment division and the American representative. Her name is Elsie Hunter!"

Koutarou had nearly opened his mouth to explain, but when he heard Horinouchi's voice, he was glad he had not robbed her the opportunity to give her own explanation.

...I would expect no less of Lady Mitsuru!

He did not lament his wasted effort. In fact, it was more that he had let the chance slip away.

Regardless, even an outsider like him could tell

what this was.

“Is a higher ranked witch challenging her to a ranker battle!?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

Far above, a figure stood vertically atop the vertical Magino Device.

The short, redheaded girl wore a Magino Form that resembled a karate uniform.

“I’m Elsie Hunter. …Now, will you accept this ranker battle against me, lower rank?”

No, thought Koutarou.

…It has already begun!

The girl had suddenly summoned her Magino Frame and made a press attack using its great weight. Her power devices must not have heated up yet, so fortunately she had not been able to fire any cannons or other projectiles. However, even though she had swung down the five hundred meter Magino Device…

…She still doesn't count this as a battle?

As he asked that, he saw Hunter raise her eyebrows in a smile.

She looked to Kagami who had stopped her Magino Device.

"With the surprise attack and weight, I thought you'd be crushed with this first attack, so I'm impressed you managed to stop it!"

The Magino Device suddenly vanished.

Hunter had removed the bonds of the ether.

As a massive amount of ether light scattered, she dropped down from several hundred meters up, now wearing her Normal Form. Her Normal Device looked like a miniature pile bunker and it was attached to her arm like a shield.

"Here I go!"

Her first strike pursued Kagami who had prepared to dodge.

Chapter 9: There is Power in Heaven and Earth

Chapter 9

“There is Power in Heaven and Earth”

Nothing is better than having plenty of energy
Depending on the situation

Nothing is better than having plenty of energy

Depending on the situation

Horinouchi's eyes pursued the battle that had just begun.

Both the Form and Device of Hunter's Normal Frame were meant for close-range combat. Horinouchi had heard the girl fell into the witch classification of Karate-style, and her white jacket and belt confirmed that. However, her movements were more of a Peek-a-Boo style with one leg placed forward and she closed in on her opponent with tremendous speed.

...Not many witches can fight on the surface.

Normally, witches used their flight abilities such as flying on a broom.

But Hunter was different. She could likely fly if she had to, but her standard tactics kept her on the ground.

Kagami on the other hand had yet to summon even her Normal Frame. She sharpened a defense spell to an acute angle and intercepted Hunter with shield bash attacks.

She was only reacting and Horinouchi knew why.

...Hunter's attacks are so fast.

Her blows linked together and never stopped. She pushed and pushed and pushed.

If Kagami fell back, Hunter would push further forward without ever stopping. This was only possible thanks to the acceleration spells opened on various parts of her body, but there was another reason.

"A stability spell near the soles of her feet!"

Horinouchi saw it below the girl's feet.

Whenever she dashed or threw a punch, a spell circle would appear where her feet touched the ground.

"Lady Mitsuru! What is that!?"

“When she presses down on her feet, the force is sent into the ground regardless of the angle and she receives the feedback!”

To move was to kick off the ground with the bottoms of one’s feet.

The relationship between one’s feet and the ground was surprisingly important in combat.

For example, when attacking, if one’s feet were on the ground, they could use that to endure the reactionary force.

To strike the enemy was to push one’s weapon into them and that would naturally produce a reactionary force. If the enemy was tough enough, they would actually push back.

If one placed their feet down and held their ground, they could not be pushed back.

Simply put, planting one’s feet on the ground and pressing down allowed them to throw all of their strength and their weapon into their opponent and it

prevented that opponent from pushing them back. This stability spell transferred any reactionary force into the ground.

"That lets her maintain her forward momentum even as she strikes and is struck!"

This was something that did not work when one's feet were off the ground or in midair. Just like for a bullet, they could not press their feet down and they would be knocked back if their opponent's defenses were stronger than them.

That was why high-speed clashes were the foundation for midair combat or projectiles.

The presence or absence of the ground below one's feet made a great difference.

If it was there, they could send all of their attack power into their opponent. That allowed them to wield less overall strength and they could make more compact combination attacks because they did not have to rely on speed.

Without it there, they could not send all of their attack power into their opponent. That meant they had to increase the overall strength they wielded and attacks tended to grow longer and more sweeping because they had to rely on speed.

Hunter was the former type, but Horinouchi and Kagami were the latter type.

No, Kagami's technique allowed her to rearrange her style to an extent, so she could adapt to the situation if needed. However, her standard tactics were based off of the witch who had taught her how things were done in "this world".

...And that was me.

Horinouchi felt a little blue over indirectly tripping someone else up.

However, she sensed some danger in the combination of attacks and speed sounding from the coastal park.

"Lady Mitsuru, below Hunter's feet!"

“I see it. She’s started to float a little.”

“Nicely detected, Lady Mitsuru!”

Koutarou is very good at raising people’s spirits.

But this was not the time for that. As Hunter picked up speed, she began to fly like a witch.

Her method was simple. She placed some distance between the stability spell below her feet and the corresponding stability spell on the ground.

That meant she was “borrowing” the ground as a foothold even while in midair.

Why would she do that?

…Because of the relationship between the direction of her feet on the ground and the reactionary force.

People’s attacks were generally oriented horizontally, so the reactionary force would of course come back in the opposite horizontal direction.

However, they could only resist it with the ground

vertically below their feet.

That created a problem. A redirection process was needed to point that horizontal force down into the ground.

They had to redirect the coming reactionary force down toward their feet.

That took a lot of doing and created wasted movement and a time lag.

That was why most witches did not fight on the surface. When doing so, they needed to be on the ground yet that ground would not receive the reactionary forces like they wanted.

Hunter, however, had solved that problem.

Even with a gap between her feet and the corresponding ground, she linked them with her stability spell.

When she stepped on the midair spell circle, it would act just like the one on the ground. She was "borrowing" the ground while in midair.

So no matter where in the sky she was, she could brace herself against the ground from any angle. And she was currently beginning to fly more and more.

Without waiting to redirect the reactionary force into the ground below, she stepped out into the empty air.

“Midair dash!”

Ether light scattered as the karate girl moved forward.

Her steps were solid.

Even when she made an attack from a normally impossible angle, she was always “standing on the ground”, so it was entirely possible.

As a result, she pushed forward, ran into the air as if up a wall, circled around, and focused on the attacks she could only make while in midair.

It could all be summed up with a single adjective.

...She’s fast!

The rotational speed of her attacks was far greater than those of the average close-range combat witch.

Even Horinouchi had to admit that, so it had to be a truly unknown threat to Kagami. Horinouchi partially felt it was her own fault that Kagami was stuck on the defensive, so…

“How is Suzaku doing?”

While watching the battle, she opened her magic circle to the side. She checked on the Suzaku’s condition after the previous day’s battle and found the red servant sleeping in a futon. It was completely sprawled out even though its tail feathers caught on the blanket and its eyes were wide open.

…Is this thing really a bird?

Something always made her question that fact and it seemed to have shown up right away this time.

Regardless, if it was asleep, then it had yet to recover from the battle.

Kagami must have noticed what she was doing because the girl asked a question while continuing to defend.

“Horinouchi, can you summon that thing?”

Horinouchi started to say no, but Hunter cut in first.

“Will she summon it? Of course not. If I defeat you, she’ll get her #4 spot back!”

“Th-that is not what I-...”

“No,” said Kagami. “That is the reality of this world, isn’t it?”

She wanted to say no, but she knew better than anyone who it was that had come out on top during the previous day’s battle.

She had not been looking up at the moon, but...

“＿＿＿”

As Hunter attacked, Kagami swung both hands.

...Is she summoning her Normal Frame!?

Horinouchi wanted to ask how she could do it while

undergoing that bombardment, but she was already seeing the answer.

She saw ether light.

As Hunter moved, the magic circle of her stability spell shattered and scattered into the air, but…

“Can I take that, Hunter? I have already made a reservation.”

The light immediately gathered around Kagami.

“Lady Mitsuru! That is-…”

Horinouchi replied at Koutarou’s urging.

“I can see it myself!”

“Head Butler, she just ignored you.”

“Well done, Lady Mitsuru! You need to focus on the battle more than commentary right now, don’t you!?”

“Having a positive outlook is fine, but she did just ignore you, Head Butler.”

“Someone! Someone please! My subordinates won’t stop shoving reality in my face!!”

Hunter gave a light whistle at her opponent’s technique.

…Just as I’d heard!

This girl could directly grab ether.

Ether was the element that made up all things and magic and spells were the techniques to use it as one pleased. However, this opponent made ether her own without using any spells based on the theory of magic.

She simply created whatever she imagined.

“Are you a god or something, Kagami Kagami?”

“No, I am a normal, powerless person.”

As she spoke, engines were created around her. It showed not even a hint of stopping and came to be with no ceremony. It was based on the Japanese

style and the ether it used came from the fragments of Hunter's broken magic circle.

"Are you a garbage collector!?"

"I am recycling it. You should call me ecological, representative of America, the great nation of consumption."

The light fit together, and...

...Not good!

Her strength rushed in as a counterattack and it matched Hunter's strikes in one aspect.

...The speed!

This opponent did not have a spell to secure her footing. Knowing that, she had sent out her greatest attack as soon as she summoned the Frame.

It was a large white and blue sword and a similarly-colored dragon servant could be seen in the magic circle.

"This is my justice. I suppose I will name it

Dikaiosyne. Hunter, you can call my servant partner Dikaio."

Hunter managed to avoid the thrust.

She created a foothold in front of herself, kicked forward in midair, and jumped upwards.

However, Kagami was already on the move. She sank down while keeping the tip of the blade in place to raise the sword vertically.

The pommel touched the stone pavement in the park and the tip of the blade was pointed up towards Hunter.

"Now, we can finally greet each other. Nice to meet you."

The sword opened up and fired a blast of light from below as soon as soon as it reached cannon form.

Koutarou saw Kagami's attack.

She fired a close-range cannon blast straight up

from Dikaoi-whatever.

It scored a direct hit. Even with her incomplete Normal Frame, air blasts from her cannon had wiped out his unit and it was powerful enough to hold its own against Horinouchi.

However...

“She deflected it!?”

Hunter had raised the bunker shield attached to her left arm and deflected Kagami’s attack from head on.

But she was still knocked up into the air and she smashed her own footing spell. She let the hit launch her through the sky in order to distance herself from Kagami. It was mostly vertical distance.

However, she was not retreating. She made a half vertical rotation in midair, created some footing towards the heavens, and swung down her bunker shield as if to hit Kagami below.

“American-style downward air!”

While rapidly descending, she fired an ether spear from the bunker shield.

It was a pile bunker.

Hunter thought to herself as she dropped down and attacked.

...Here too.

She had seen it after being knocked upwards.

She had also seen it on top of her Magino Device earlier.

Around Tokyo Bay, the city of Tokyo was seriously damaged.

Its height had been worn down and giant holes had been torn down to the crust in places.

She knew what that was. She saw it far too much when she flew into the air for training.

It was mostly damage from Hexennacht ten years prior.

There would have been a few from before that too, but they had been overwritten by the more recent ones. The most damage had occurred ten years ago.

Tokyo was of course not the only place so badly damaged. The destruction had occurred on a global scale and everything had ground to a halt for mankind.

It had taken at least five years for the damaged areas to recover. The sooner people had begun working at a solution, the sooner the area had recovered. Countless places around the world were still in the process of recovering.

The Tokyo area had been one of the earliest to recover. That was why Hunter had transferred to Shihouin Academy to train as a witch and why she had assumed she could focus on the Ranker battles there, but...

“Here too.”

There was destruction everywhere.

The decade-old scars were healing, but that was only because they had abandoned the places they decided were hopeless.

Mankind had marked their place and closed themselves inside a cage, so…

“_ _ _ _”

Hunter did not use her words.

She used her attitude and actions.

She was an American.

That nation had the world’s most powerful military and was proud of its position as the world police.

“Pierce, Hedgehog!!”

The ether spear was fired from the acceleration pathway. Kagami had the ground directly below her, so there was nowhere for the damage to escape. That meant a direct hit would lead to a single conclusion.

…*Victory!*

Hunter watched her attack land.

She saw Kagami.

The girl held her sword directly below, but the sword was no longer in its cannon form. It had closed into attack form and Kagami was not using it to defend.

“Hunter.”

She heard her speak.

“Earlier, you suddenly brought your Magino Frame down on me without even introducing yourself. That is a very interesting kind of handheld Magino, but I have a question and an answer. First…”

First…

“Question 1: With a Normal Frame, is it possible to summon a Magino Frame without superheating your Phlogiston Heart?”

…This girl!

“Answer 1: It is.”

After all…

“A witch always carries a Phlogiston Heart. Summoning the Frame may alter its accumulation amount and rate, but it is always there. That is why Horinouchi’s servant maintains its exhaustion even when she is not using her Frame. That proves that the Phlogiston Heart is jointly managed with the servant. In other words…”

“Are you saying you kept receiving my attacks earlier to speed up the superheating of your Phlogiston Heart!?”

“Would it be showing off if I said yes?”

Kagami kicked up her sword.

The rising blade struck Hunter’s pile bunker. The blade shattered, but…

“My charge is now complete.”

With those words, the entire sword exploded and became a cloud of ether light.

Horinouchi looked past the expanding ether light and exploding stone pavement. A massive object was appearing within the scattering wreckage and light.

Its construction was accompanied by the ringing of a large bell.

“That’s Kagami’s Dika-whatever!”

“That would be Dikaiosyne, Lady Mitsuru!”

“I would expect no less of you, Koutarou!”

I should write that down. Not Dukaiosyne or Dekaiosyne, but Dikaiosyne.

She typed it into a magic circle and the search told her it meant “justice” in Greek.

She wondered why Kagami would go through that kind of trouble, but that seemed to be the kind of person Kagami was.

However, that was not the only thing to worry about

at the moment.

Another Magino Device was appearing right in front of Dikaiosyne.

This was Hunter's Magino Device and its form solidified along with the deafening sound of a large engine.

It had heavy armor and a multi-acceleration cannon in the center. Also...

...That's a four blessing model!

The acceleration reactor frame was not just held on either the left and right or the top and bottom. Instead, it was held from all four sides. Each individual acceleration unit was made smaller, so its initial speed would not be as great as a two blessing model like Horinouchi's Akerindou. However, the speed of the shells would not drop by much and would be more stable. That meant one thing...

...It's meant for sniping!

Akerindou also primarily used projectiles, but it

used spells and such to give the shells homing ability and stable acceleration.

On the other hand, Hunter's Magino Device itself would provide the stability and would use less after-the-fact spells to provide homing ability or anything like that.

But if it was more of a sniping weapon...

"You mustn't move away from her, Kagami!"

Hunter swung both arms while having her Magino Device rapidly ascend.

She named what she rode.

"This is the Hedgehog, my Magino Device."

She contacted someone from above the rear central radome.

"US Anti-Witch Combat Division of North American Aerospace Defense Command, please respond."

"This is U.A.H.F. Representative Hunter, your

Magino Device's deployment calculations have already reached eighty percent. We are receiving the proper feedback."

It had been a while since she had replied with "Thanks!" in English. Then the deployment calculations for the Hedgehog did indeed scroll across the spell circles opened in front of her hands.

Her Magino Device, the Hedgehog, was not hers alone.

It was much like how Horinouchi received backup from the Horinouchi family and from Shinto.

"The American representative receives backup from the US military."

What did it matter if the other girl could create things with her imagination? Using diligent training, improvement, and cooperation was the American way, so...

"_ _ _ _"

Hunter swung both hands and accelerated the

Magino Device's construction. And...

"Ohhh!"

She broke out into song.

On the other end of the transmission, a large underground space was lined with consoles and magic circles. Everyone hurriedly working in front of the monitor light listened to it.

Their representative was singing while speeding up her work.

"That's our national anthem, 'The Star-Spangled Banner'."

She sang the second verse.

—On the shore, dimly seen through the mists of the deep,

—Where the foe's haughty host in dread silence reposes,

—What is that which the breeze, o'er the towering

steep,

—As it fitfully blows, half conceals, half discloses?

—Now it catches the gleam of the morning's first beam,

—In full glory reflected now shines on the stream

—'Tis the star-spangled banner! O long may it wave

—O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!

They all cheered at the witch's song.

"Representative Hunter!"

One stood up and shouted into the magic circle showing the witch.

"The calculations are complete! They actually finished a bit ago, but, sorry, I wanted to hear it to the end. ...Are you already on the move!?"

"Thanks!"

The karate girl was moving.

“I’d started by the second measure!”

Hunter had the Hedgehog float. It flew up into the sky, sweeping away the ether light spreading below.

The Hedgehog’s primary technique was its sniper cannon, but its long acceleration pathway strictly required the entire Device to be pointed accurately at her opponent. Those back in the States said that difficulty of use was similar to a handgun, but she did not entirely understand it herself.

Regardless…

…*Fly*.

She sent that instruction to the Normal Device Hedgehog on her left arm that now acted as the controller. A hedgehog-type servant appeared in a magic circle and nodded.

She would put even more distance between her and her enemy.

“Here I go!”

Once she gave that yell, another yell reached her from the sword whose construction was not yet complete.

“Not so fast!”

It was Kagami, but…

…You haven’t finished constructing yours yet!

From what Hunter could see, Kagami had put together the external armor first in order to avoid Hunter’s attack. That meant the incomplete parts would be the acceleration system and the shell formation area on the back.

It could handle close-range attacks and defense, but it would not be able to pull off long-range attacks or movement.

However, her decision itself was right. Hunter was a sniper. She could still attack with her secondary cannon, but trying to defeat Kagami here would give that girl time to finish the acceleration system and shell formation area while the secondary cannon

wore down her armor.

Hunter decided her best option was to fire her secondary cannon and fall back while avoiding the position directly in front of her enemy.

The sword attempted to turn her way, so she fired her secondary cannon to escape. Her output was still weak, so she could not focus much power on that secondary cannon.

Nevertheless, she managed to put some distance between them.

...Time to borrow some acceleration!

After that thought, her opponent began to move.

“I said not so fast, Hunter!”

The sword suddenly shot her way.

“What!?”

The sword’s accelerator should not have been complete, but as soon as Hunter wondered how this was possible, she found her answer. On the back of

the sword, she saw light in the acceleration pathway where the shell formation area had yet to be included.

"You reversed the cannon's acceleration pathway and fired an blast of air!?"

"I have tried firing air a few times already."

This is ridiculous. Acceleration pathways are generally one-way! No, but this girl can "imagine". Two-way ones do exist, so it isn't that strange for her to choose one.

The rest was simple.

The sword blade collided with the Hedgehog's upper armor.

The malleable composite ether armor was stronger than steel or normal composite armor, but it still bent and sparked. Also, a voice arrived from beyond the roar of impact.

"This is my greeting."

As Hunter watched, a single part reached completion.

The shell formation area attached itself to the back of Kagami's sword.

...Did she give up on the acceleration system and focused on that instead!?

She had used her cannon's acceleration pathway for acceleration because her first priority had been reaching Hunter. It had also allowed her to stop creating the acceleration system and instead pour all of the ether into the shell formation area. That only left one thing.

"_ _ _ _"

A cannon blast struck Hunter from point blank range.

The blast tore apart the sky and briefly lit up the darkening heavens.

The shockwave shook the forest, tossed spray across the ocean, and caused the pier to hop up.

Rubble flew toward Horinouchi, but she activated

the kind of reflective pseudo-defense spell sold to witches. As a boy, Koutarou excelled at defense, so he could get by on his own willpower.

“She did it!”

Kagami had scored a direct hit from close range and Horinouchi knew firsthand how powerful that Magino Frame’s main cannon was. Akerindou was a wonderful Magino Frame that focused entirely on attack and therefore had little defensive power, but it still took quite a bit of power to break it. Dikaiosyne had already proven it had that power.

“Ah.”

As the scattering cloud of ether dust cleared, the result came into view.

However…

“No damage!?”

Hunter’s Magino Frame floated in midair. Its surface shimmered from the heat of the hit, but it was entirely undamaged.

Chapter 10: A Will Fills the Distance

Chapter 10

“A Will Fills the Distance”

Overwhelming extraterritorial shellfire

Overwhelming extraterritorial shellfire

Hunter smiled bitterly. Several magic circles from those back in the States had appeared around her.

They had quickly divided up the work and calculated out a solution.

...A force redirection spell derived from my foothold stability spell.

The Hedgehog's armor was physically quite strong as well, but she had cast a spell on it to further increase its defenses. Instead of hardening the armor, she had used the "foothold" spell.

"I had the damage 'step' out and away."

Damage had permeated the entire five hundred meter form, but it had been allowed to escape from every single component. It all had to be done at once, so it had been far too much work for a single person.

However, Hunter could do it.

“The US has poured all of its military technology into this. It isn’t about to lose to something that’s powerful in just one way.”

“Representative Hunter, we could only do this because of your initial instructions.”

She heard the witch who acted as her commander back in U.S.A.H. Next, a male operator spoke up.

“You are synced with the Hedgehog. Without your reflexes and decisions, we cannot calculate anything. It all comes down to the one who provides the initial instructions.”

“Thanks,” said Hunter.

They’re all such nice people, she thought.

So…

“Can I fire!?”

“Taking the your coming movement into account, you will have thirteen percent power for that. You

can fire a non-physical shell!”

“The enemy Magino Frame lacks its mobility system, so it cannot pursue you!”

That settled it.

“Fire!!”

“Kagami, you need to put up your defenses!”

Even before she was told, Kagami had started switching Dikaiosyne from cannon mode to close-range attack mode.

“You never can seem to decide how politely to speak to me.”

“Just hurry up!”

“No need.”

“Eh?” said Horinouchi just before light exploded from Dikaiosyne.

Kagami lacked her main acceleration system. If she could not hold her ground in midair, then…

“This could be a problem!”

The impact produced a metallic sound and Kagami was blown away along with Dikaiosyne.

Horinouchi listened to the wind.

“...Ah.”

It only lasted an instant. Ether light scattered through the sky like fireworks and the two massive structures vanished from overhead.

One had been blown away by a cannon blast and the other had accelerated using the recoil and...

“Wh-where did it go!?”

Koutarou, I didn’t mean you. You don’t have to raise your hand.

Kagami lost sight of her enemy, but that was not all.

“Where am I?”

How far had she been sent through the air? All she knew was that a few minutes had passed.

Lacking an acceleration system was troublesome, but Dikaiosyne was still functioning. Fortunately, the cannon blast had hit the closed blade. The blade was meant to double as a ram, so it had Dikaiosyne's thickest armor and it was the first thing she had pictured in her head when making it.

...Heh heh heh. Isn't it cool?

But the real problem was her location. She had assumed she was somewhere in Tokyo Bay, but...

...Is this...?

The geography visible down on her right was somewhat similar, but the bay was not deep enough and the entrance to the bay lacked the Uraga Channel made from the Miura Peninsula and the Bousou Peninsula.

Also, the landmass visible on the far side seemed to be the Miura Peninsula instead of the Bousou

Peninsula.

“So would Mount Fuji be behind me?”

It was and that was something of a relief.

It proved that this world was no different from the world she had come from.

…And it proves this is one of the worlds we created.

She opened two magic circles while she thought: one to search for the enemy and one that controlled optics.

The first one told her there were no other Magino Frames within an eighty kilometer radius and she used the optical one to look across the horizon.

“Where is she?”

Where was Hunter’s Magino Frame?

Hunter floated among the clouds.

“Already close to Hawaii. The Hedgehog may be an armored sniper weapon, but it isn’t slow.”

Several islands were lit by the setting sun below.

She was over six thousand kilometers away from Japan, but it had taken less than ten minutes to arrive. More than eight or nine kilometers per second was easily over Mach 20. She had moved faster than a shell fired by the average Magino Frame.

Needless to say, that kind of speed was impossible even with the Hedgehog's acceleration.

However, the "foothold" spell made it possible.

The moon could be seen overhead and a few manmade objects were visible between it and the earth.

"Satellites."

The United States alone had a thousand of them orbiting the earth to observe the moon and protect the earth. Those manmade objects made a full revolution of the earth in an hour and a half, so what would happen if she worked with the United States

to use one as her “foothold”.

The answer was movement at extreme speed.

That forcible swing-by allowed her to move anywhere in the world in a very short amount of time. That also meant she could quickly move to a sniping spot where her enemy could not detect her.

The frictional heat the Hedgehog had been unable to fully eliminate caused its surface to shimmer.

“Honestly.”

Its armor was more meant to endure that acceleration than it was to defend against attacks.

For lower Rankers, she only needed to collide with them during the initial swing-by acceleration. If she was confident enough, she would provide a shell the extreme acceleration of the swing-by and blow away her opponent with the shockwave as it passed by.

But that was not enough at the upper levels. If they could teleport, then even her acceleration seemed

like a joke.

…That's the problem with magic.

She was a witch too, but her home country had led to her focus more on the scientific or engineering side of it all. She thought of magic as a type of technology. That was why the clearly bizarre magical powers she sometimes saw at Shihouin Academy made for exhausting opponents.

At any rate, she had arrived at a good position. Hawaii was the westernmost point in the Pacific where she could receive the full backup of the United States. Guam and Okinawa had been wiped out ten years before, not to mention the Japanese mainland.

So…

"I'd rather not damage Japan here, but…"

"Representative Hunter, this is U.S.A.H. of the North American Aerospace Defense Command! We have synced with the seventh fleet deployed in the

Pacific!”

“Output is at eighty-seven percent. You can now produce physical shells.”

“I see,” said Hunter with a nod.

The rest was simple. The magic circles surrounding her contained the calculations made by the others. Now she only had to act as the on-scene commander and the actual combatant.

“Cannon fully deployed. System all green. Full barrel open.”

“Finished inputting the enemy location. Coordinates confirmed. …Fire-time transformation and guidance processing confirmed. Swing-by trajectory path confirmed. Please fire the first shot within seventeen seconds!”

“You can fire, Representative Hunter!”

“Understood. Magino Frame Hedgehog…main cannon.”

Hunter thrust her right first straight forward.

“Fire!”

Koutarou was the first to notice.

During a battle between witches, the international organization named U.A.H. would remain silent as it had been created to oppose the Black Witch. This was to keep the battle fair, but it also meant the forces supporting the witches had to use everything at their disposal.

Currently, those two forces were the United States military and the Horinouchi family. The overall strength of the one dwarfed that of the other, but the Horinouchi family had been chosen as the Shinto representative for Hexennacht.

That meant the Horinouchi family had the cooperation of the Shinto network of all local Japanese deities. That network covered all of Japan’s territorial land, sea, and airspace.

All of Japan’s Shinto shrines and the Buddhist

temples working with them had spread their protective barriers to their full detection range and the powerful shrines around the country were using their ley line control systems to detect the enemy. They had learned two things: the foreign presence had left Japan, and…

“Lady Mitsuru! A flying object is approaching from the southwest! It has exceeded Mach 25!”

“That’s an upper Ranker’s shell, isn’t it!?”

Horinouchi’s Akerindou could rival that in its initial speed and tension, but this had already arrived off the coast of Bousou and was approaching Kagami at tremendous speed.

“Kagami, please dodge it!!”

Oh, she’s being more polite again, thought Kagami, but she had something else to focus on.

“What? All the way from Hawaii?”

…Not bad.

This was Hunter's cannon shot.

Horinouchi was Shinto, so she would be able to detect anything in Japanese territory. So if someone was going to target Mount Fuji, a shot from the south would be caught early by the Okinotori Islands and similar territories.

The best direction would be from the island-less east and Hawaii was a very American choice, but...

"This is not good."

Mount Fuji was behind her.

She could avoid the shot if she tried, but...

"How troublesome."

After all...

"I do not like correcting something I have already written."

As she said that, one of her magic circles reacted.

The circle could detect anything within eighty kilometers and this flying object was moving at

more than eight kilometers per second, so...

“It is already here, Hunter!”

A moment later, power itself collided with Dikaiosyne.

Dikaiosyne broke. The blade had the thickest armor, but before it could even bend, the force of the impact caused it to shrink, peel away as if melted, and then break into a top and bottom half.

The impact then tore into the rest of the sword, randomly striking different spots. The five hundred meter sword was forced into a spin and thrown into the Sea of Trees east of Mount Fuji. The crust of the Sea of Trees was smashed and earth shot to height of a few kilometers.

It sounded much like a broken bell and the shockwave tore into the Sea of Trees and blasted the crust away like a crashing wave.

The air current forced up by that earthen

destruction was caught by the wind descending from Mount Fuji and fell back to earth a dozen kilometers further along.

Hunter's shell had hit Kagami's Magino Device.

"I did it!"

Hunter viewed the situation using the satellite that had provided her shell the final swing-by.

From her bird's-eye-view in the evening sky, the eastern slope of Mount Fuji and the Sea of Trees looked like a dark shadow, but one of the operators in their headquarters enchanted the imagine with an engineering control spell.

The image grew brighter and more focused.

She could now see the destroyed land.

"Ah."

She briefly gasped because she was bracing herself to see tremendous damage.

The shell had been made to apply buffering to anything outside a radius of two kilometers so it would only damage her enemy and that enemy's immediate surroundings. This was a battle between witches, not a fight to the death.

However, the fragments could not all be eliminated and the collision with the other Magino Device had affected the surrounding area quite a bit. She refused to say she was "glad" it had happened in the Sea of Trees, but it was definitely better than in a populated area.

However, she saw something beyond the rising smoke and the massive amount of ether light.

"Is that…?"

It was a blade. It was badly broken, but it was definitely there.

On the dusk-lit earth, something was floating up from shell hit where it looked like something had gouged into the ground and then been dragged along.

The floating object was a sword.

No, it could no longer be called a sword. After all, the blade had broken, the guard had shattered, and ether light smoke was pouring from it.

However, Hunter knew something. No matter how damaged or injured they might be…

“A magic girl has not lost until her Phlogiston Heart breaks.”

She knew the individual named Kagami had to be struggling there. Even after all that destruction, her will was telling the sky she could still fight.

So…

“The enemy’s Magino Devi-…Frame is still functional!” came the report.

“That’s…”

Ridiculous, she thought, while also thinking, *I wouldn’t have it any other way.*

…I would do the same thing.

Hunter also had something to bear, so…

…How about you, Kagami Kagami?"

The analysis of the shell hit arrived. It showed her shell hitting a 3D model of the enemy Magino Frame. In the instant of impact, Kagami had tilted her blade as if twisting it.

"She slanted her Magino Device and kept it moving to reduce and distribute the damage!" reported an operator.

"So she avoided a direct hit? …Dammit."

Hunter was angry and frustrated but also delighted.

This was a formidable opponent.

She raised her arms as if lifting the bird's-eye-view footage before her eyes.

"I've already damaged you, so how are you going to escape this one?"

She did not know what Kagami would do, but she knew the girl would do something. She would do

something just like she had done several times from the beginning of the battle until now. And so…

“Prepare to load the second shot! Let’s keep pushing and-…”

As she spoke, she saw something in front of her.

She was looking at Kagami's sword in the satellite footage.

A figure was standing in the center of it.

It was Kagami Kagami.

That girl had chosen an outdated Holy Knight-style Form and its armor was broken in a few places. Perhaps to repair it, ether light was hovering around those spots, but that was not the problem.

...Oh, come on.

Kagami was looking up at her.

Her eyebrows were raised as her gaze turned directly toward Hunter.

This was a common sight. It was simply her enemy giving her an unyielding look.

However...

"Eh? W-wait a second..."

Hunter could not blame the operator for being confused.

“Are you returning my gaze through the surveillance satellite, Kagami Kagami!?”

...How ridiculous is this girl?

She wanted to know, but just how much did that correspond with her own goals? However, she already had the means prepared.

“Representative Hunter! The second shot’s swing-by trajectory has been confirmed!”

“Please fire within fifteen seconds!”

“Thanks,” Hunter said from the bottom of her heart.

And...

“Second shot...”

She prepared to say “fire”, but...

“Enough!!”

A sudden voice cut into the communication line.

It had to be someone with the authority to interfere in her communications with the United States.

“I, Shihouin Academy Headmaster Shihouin Cerisier, command both of you to stop. And…”

And…

“I will determine the outcome of this match. … Okay?”

Chapter 11: And Now Some Rest

Chapter 11

“And Now Some Rest”

“Okay, time for an on-scene report from Miss Horinouchi.”

“Okay, time for an on-scene report from Miss Horinouchi.”

When she heard the headmaster saying she would determine the outcome of Kagami and Hunter’s match, Horinouchi opened a spell circle.

The communications screen displayed the headmaster smiling with her office in the background.

Despite the intense battle overhead, the window visible in the office did not even have its defense barrier closed.

Even during a battle between rankers, this woman had the skill to respond to any emergency. In fact, she was one of those who had fought to the very end to earn the right to participate in the previous Hexennacht. In terms of the ranker system, she was the same as the current top three. And…

…I’ve heard she was the one who fought with my

mother until the very end.

The wielder of that much power spoke to her through the screen.

“Listen.”

Horinouchi had not taken part in this battle, so this meant little to her. However, it was a very meaningful intercession for the ones above the Fuji Sea of Trees and above Hawaii.

“Miss Kagami has yet to officially join our school and we have yet to resolve the issue of Miss Horinouchi’s rank.”

But…

“Miss Hunter, you were trying to push away these two lower ranked girls, weren’t you?”

“Yeah, I was,” said Hunter. “It’s about time for the top three to be fighting amongst ourselves, so it would be trouble if we were attacked by the 4th ranked representative of the general division or someone even lower.”

“I see. That makes sense.”

“H-headmaster!”

Horinouchi asked without thinking.

“Are you rejecting the ranker system!? As long as we’re in the combat range of each other’s rank, we can challenge each other in the hopes of building ourselves up further. Isn’t that the entire point of the ranker system!?”

“Yes, but I also understand Miss Hunter’s point. Interference from an outsider would only get in the way this late in the game.”

The headmaster was clearly looking at Horinouchi when she continued.

“So how about this? I will officially accept Miss Kagami into our school.”

“Oh?”

In her spell circle, Kagami placed a hand on her chin while wearing her broken Magino Form.

“No entrance exam? So are you accepting me based on my special talent?”

“You have already shown me more than enough special talent,” said the headmaster with a smile. “The previous battle between Miss Kagami and Miss Horinouchi was never resolved. That leaves you both with a temporary rank of 4, so I think I’ll treat you two as a unit.”

“I-I…”

“And as a unit…you are to battle Miss Hunter.”

This was an order from the headmaster, so she has no choice but to obey.

…I’m so pathetic.

She thought that because rejecting the headmaster’s command would most likely place Kagami at #4 and drop her down to #5.

If she really did not want this, she only had to take that option, but she did not.

“— — — —”

She had a number of thoughts as to why, but when she summed them all up…

…My pride.

If she ran away here, she would fail to live up to her pride and she would lose to herself. So…

"Headmaster," she asked a question with the intention to accept everything about this situation. "What happens if we lose?"

Hunter released a shallow breath.

…She intends to do it?

She sighed.

There was a reason she felt so much disappointment.

…She doesn't get why I picked a fight with them.

This was a problem. Especially because she was putting a burden on her team in the States. But…

"What happens if you lose?" The headmaster smiled.

“If that happens, how about we keep your ranks the same but remove your right to challenge a higher ranker?”

“You mean…?”

Hunter reflexively replied to Horinouchi’s voice.

“Yeah! That’s perfect!”

She expressed her agreement.

“That would mean challenging these lower rankers meant something after all!”

Hunter agreed with the headmaster’s suggestion.

…That’s right!

She would “stop” Horinouchi and Kagami here.

She would not allow them to interfere with the three ranked above them.

That was what she wanted.

“I’m counting on this.”

She had gone out of her way to challenge them because she had wanted to compare their power.

Her Hedgehog was backed by the full power of America.

Horinouchi's Akerindou was backed by Japan's Shinto and a powerful conglomerate.

And Dikai-whatever had been produced by the mysterious but powerful intruder named Kagami.

It had been immediately obvious which of those was the most powerful as a "fighting force".

It came down to firepower, armor, and mobility.

Her Hedgehog outdid the other two Frames in all three categories. It was true they might get creative in their attempt to oppose her, but...

...Winning a fight without getting creative is where true strength lies.

Akerindou had excellent long-range attack power, but it barely had any armor.

Dikai-whatever was most likely the close-range type, but she had already proven she could break its armor.

She had escaped this one unscathed and she had seen what her opponents had to offer.

They could not keep up with her swing-by movement spell, so she could unilaterally attack them and end the battle.

That was what she had just done.

...But...

Horinouchi intended to accept the challenge.

Hunter had honestly thought the girl would back down after seeing their difference in strength.

Had Hunter been too conceited?

Or did Horinouchi have a reason not to back down?

She hoped it was the former because she knew an opponent driven by a reason was much more fixated on victory.

She had crushed several enemies like that already. She had literally crushed them.

They had all sworn to challenge her to a rematch, but they had never reached her.

...I climbed the ranks so fast they couldn't catch up.

The ranks were determined both by who one defeated and by one's win percentage.

Even if they had defeated a top ranker, it was assumed someone with a low win percentage had a poor chance of winning on Hexennacht. And there were a lot who were undefeated, so their overall rank advancement would be slow.

The top rankers were witches who had not gotten caught up in that.

They were generally undefeated.

Their number of battles and win percentage were more than enough to fill the top three spots and they had actually taken those spots by pushing aside those who had previously held them.

Horinouchi had done the same. Those in the fifth and sixth spots had probably been similar.

Loss was a foreign concept to them.

That was why Horinouchi's "draw" the other day had been so shocking.

They never considered it a possibility for themselves, but damage or injury now was dangerous. After all, Hexennacht was approaching. It was time to select who would take part.

Even if they won an unexpected ranker battle, they could still be damaged enough that they could not take part in Hexennacht.

That girl had to have considered that kind of problem, but she still had a reason to fight.

She had a reason why she could not back down, so…

"Fine."

This far from Japan, the sky was already dyed in the colors of night.

Hunter spoke with the light of the moon washing over her.

"You can challenge me as a unit if you want. I have a partner too: the full power of America and the technology developed to oppose the Black Witch."

That was far greater than a unit.

Fighting alongside her was the surviving military strength of a superpower once known as the world police. And…

…The people backing me mean even more than that.

"So," she said. "So there's no way I can lose."

Horinouchi noticed the communication line from Hunter had ended.

She sighed and so did the headmaster in her spell circle.

"I don't envy Miss Hunter."

"Eh?"

“Yes,” said the headmaster. “Removing her Frame near Hawaii means she’ll have a hard time getting back.”

“Won’t the US army help?”

“But if a warship approaches here, Lisbeth will be pissed and say I failed to manage our forces.”

Horinouchi could only reply with an “oh, I see”, but a sudden voice called out to her.

“Oh, no! Lady Mitsuru, we will send out a helicopter immediately!”

It was Koutarou as he ran down the pier toward the parking lot.

“We must pick up Lady Kagami!”

...Now that you mention it.

This was not good. She had been worried about Kagami when she had been hit, but due to the girl’s character, she had completely forgotten about her afterwards.

But damage to the Frame was fed back to the Phlogiston Heart of its user. If she had been hit with that much damage at once…

“Kagami!”

“Oh, sorry. I just overheard your butler saying he would come get me.”

The communications spell circle had no video. It was only Kagami’s voice. And…

“I had expected an impressive dinner at your place, but…”

“Kagami, you…”

Was Kagami bringing up that everyday topic to avoid mentioning something?

…Was she injured?

Horinouchi’s worries were answered by a voice.

“To be honest, I have not had a bite to eat since I got here.”

“Th-there wasn’t anything for you this morning!?”

She looked over to the headmaster's communication spell circle and saw the video had been replaced with the text "I forgot about that".

...Th-that woman!

"Listen, Manko."

"H-how many times am I going to have to tell you not to call me that!?"

"You mean you would prefer Miss Manko?"

That isn't what I meant!

A strange smile appeared on the corner of her mouth, but she managed to control her heart.

"Koutarou is on his way there."

"Lady Mitsuru! Not yet! I'm not on my way yet! The car was flipped over!"

For some reason, hearing that made her feel better.

She had no choice but to call U.A.H.J. and have them pick up Koutarou first.

In the end, Hunter did not get back until midnight.

She used her swing-by method for part of the way, but there had not been a carrier in satellite orbit for the rest of the way. She had switched to her Normal Frame and joined the seventh fleet that had supported her during the battle.

On the ship, she had been celebrated for her results, but the male soldiers had treated her like a mascot. The witches working with the fleet had all been older, so they had worried for her like mothers.

They had asked her what she wanted to eat, but she had politely rejected the offer.

“I have lessons tomorrow too.”

That seemed to be enough for them to understand her situation and mental state. They prepared an insulated bag stuffed with American snacks, ready-made meals, and other foods.

“When you have a break, I hope we can have a barbecue on the coast or something.”

Just as she said “thanks”, word arrived that the airplane was ready.

A few American military bases were still active even in Japan. There still was not much at Yokosuka because the reconstruction of Kantou had been focused on Yokohama. Yokota only had communications equipment and a heliport left after the events of ten years ago.

“I’ll ride with one going to Atsugi.”

“You sure you want to ride on top?”

“I have to hop off partway through to get back to school.”

“You sure are a diligent student.”

After that exchange, she climbed on top of the plane carrying the data recorded during the battle and began the return trip.

She loved the sky.

She had always looked up at it in the past.

She still did that, but the moon was in the way. She also loved the blue sky.

On America's west coast, she had looked to the sky and listened to the waves.

Palm trees and rows of white houses had covered the coast.

But the many hills had made a motorcycle indispensable.

Whether in the sea or on a tall hill, she had been able to see the blue sky. It had only taken a short walk from the rows of white houses to see it from either of those places.

She did not think the blue sky had changed in the last ten years, but she knew of a difference.

There was a clear difference in the "sky".

It was currently night and the sky felt cold.

That was only natural since the moonlit sky of night was the sky of the Black Witch. But...

“I won’t forgive you for contaminating the blue sky as well.”

She saw the lights of Yokohama just before midnight. She gave the plane’s canopy a light tap and dove off. The plane lit its afterburners to say goodbye in the darkness. In midair, she checked a spell circle to make sure everything was arranged for her to legally enter the country.

The confirmation program displayed the emblem of the Horinouchi family, but that may have been because Shinto was in charge of detecting those trespassing on Japanese land. If so…

…Kagami apparently slipped past that check when she showed up.

What kind of opponent had she been? Would they face each other again in a rematch?

She did not know.

Before long, she was back at the school.

“As usual, no one’s sleeping.”

The special equipment division of Shihouin Academy had light in most of its windows and light coming from the rooftop. She clearly saw the flickering of a bonfire, so an African witch was probably doing something there.

When her schoolmates noticed her from the rooftop, they whistled and cast a welcoming divine protection on her.

She kicked off the wall to climb to the rooftop as well.

“What, are we having a party? I brought some food.”

“Ahh, we’re far too drunk to taste it, so that’d be a waste.”

The witches of her year and her underclassmen raised their hands in agreement while sitting around the fire.

“You had a hell of a win in that battle.”

“That was just one of the two, though. And…”

A spell circle had appeared next to her face earlier.

“Horinouchi is temporarily being held at rank 4 and she sent me a request for an official ranker battle.”

It’s set for tomorrow. No, I guess at this point that’s early morning today.

She did not even have five hours to spare. Horinouchi probably did not want her to recover from her exhaustion, but…

“Eat up.”

A witch from Italy passed her a plate of chicken.

“It was cooked over the fire with an herb spell to remove your weariness and apply a divine protection of luck.”

“Hey, do we have space for Hunter to sleep today?”

“The seventh workshop is being used to build a spell clock, so she should be able to sleep there if she closes the blinds.”

“Then that’s where she’ll sleep.”

It was amazing how quickly they all settled that.

They had found a place for her without disturbing their own pace.

“Honestly.”

Feeling like she had returned to her current home, Hunter sat down and bit into the chicken.

“Wow, nutmeg!”

Chapter 12: We Will Meet Again

Chapter 12

“We Will Meet Again”

What should I do?

What should I do?

A day had passed since he had been named Dikaio.

The dragon child opened a spell circle and used it as a door to the outside world.

...Hospital room.

He knew this place. It mostly matched the knowledge he had been given. To support a witch, he had needed to know about this kind of place just in case. It was still early morning and there was only one other individual in the room with him.

...A remarkable person.

The name "Kagami" had been inputted into his memory, but servants had a natural understanding of the relationship they had with their master. On occasion, their understanding of that relationship would fail and they would eat or kill their master, but that had apparently not happened in about a century.

The relationship he felt with her was one between a remarkable person and himself.

The remarkable person was sleeping.

She was not yet healed.

He had protected her. He had done a good job.

But the damage to her Phlogiston Heart had brought mental weariness.

That was simultaneously her strongest and weakest point.

She was a witch, yet she was not one in the strictest sense.

He was assisting her, but she could not pool her mental strength inside herself. In exchange for controlling such great amounts of ether, she had an almost nonexistent pool of internal mental strength with which to initially accelerate her power.

She was from a world where no one could *use* magic, but in exchange, she could *create* magic.

However, that meant her Phlogiston Heart could not be normalized and it was dependent on her willpower at the time.

A witch's Phlogiston Heart was her "spirit", but it was normally based on her pool of mental strength.

With a powerful "spirit", not even an enemy's attacks could damage her Phlogiston Heart. And even if it was damaged, the Heart could last as long as she had plenty of mental power pooled up.

If that pool ran out, her Heart was dependent on her "spirit".

But based on his knowledge, not many witches' Phlogiston Hearts would last after receiving a blast like that. And she had done so with nothing in her pool.

Just how powerful was her "spirit"?

That was why he thought of her as a "remarkable person".

Nevertheless, that remarkable person's Phlogiston

Heart had been damaged. And she had not intentionally let it happen as she had during the battle with the Suzaku's master. It had been a complete surprise attack.

Her Phlogiston Heart had persisted for a while after that, but it had given out as soon as she landed in the Sea of Trees.

She had spoken to him below those trees.

"Dikaio, I am going to take a quick nap. You do so as well once you are feeling up to it."

She had quickly fallen asleep, but his first priority had been calling for help.

When he had called, the person named Koutarou had been too busy arguing with a maid who was calling him incompetent.

…How unsightly.

With that earnest thought, Dikaio had continued hitting the rescue spell's call button until help had finally arrived.

Nothing had changed since. Rest was the best medicine for a damaged Phlogiston Heart. As her servant, he too had been damaged, but…

“That’s a dragon for you. You mostly healed yourself using the ley line in the Sea of Trees, didn’t you?”

He had only needed some simple healing. That healing had been administered by the Suzaku’s master who had helped him escape. As for where she was now…

“_ _ _ _”

He heard some footsteps outside the hospital room.

It was her.

Dikaio heard the Suzaku’s master walking away from the hospital room’s door.

He could tell it was her.

Not only did he recognize the footsteps, but he could sense her servant’s presence.

The Suzaku was a rare type of avian servant. It had been passed down by the Horinouchi family for generations and Dikaio had seen it when he was being healed.

To tell its master he was healed, it had started doing Hindu squats above her.

...Is that thing really a bird?

It was said a servant's idiosyncrasies grew stronger the longer they lived, so that had to be the explanation. Maybe.

Regardless, the Suzaku's master had just left.

...No.

He noticed something in the room that was not present in normal hospital rooms: flowers in a vase.

She had likely placed them there before he had woken.

The footsteps continued to leave.

Hunter wanted to believe it was not sleep deprivation that made the morning sun seem so bright.

She had tried to get enough sleep. When she had woken up in the partitioned seventh workshop that morning, the others had still been drinking and partying on the rooftop.

They sure are tough, she thought.

But…

“Oh, are you going?”

“Do your best.”

“When you’re done, how about we talk about your homeland a bit?”

After they saw her off, she felt like she had become a little tougher too.

This would be an official battle. By the time she approached the pier in her uniform, the morning sun was rising.

Her servant, the Hedgehog, had already woken up and was entirely focused on grooming itself. Watching it roll around in the spell circle helped calm her, but…

…Oh, when I get back, what should I do with the food I was given?

The others were hopelessly drunk.

The snacks would be well received, but people could get a little picky when it came to meat. The special equipment students did not mind the stains from their own work, but a lot of witches saw any other stains as “impurities”. Specific types of seasonings and oils could actually be a real problem. Also, any meat cooked in American spices was poorly received. That could be hard to understand for people who were fine even with pineapple in the sauce, but that was just how it was.

However…

“Oh.”

Just as she thought the wind had changed, she heard footsteps.

Someone was approaching from the school building behind her.

“Horinouchi.”

The girl was alone.

“Only you?”

The girl named Kagami was not with her.

Hunter had mostly expected this, but she felt some disappointment once it actually happened.

But a sudden change came over Horinouchi’s expression. She lowered the ends of her eyebrows and looked away.

“I am enough on my own. I will prove that here.”

That’s right, thought Horinouchi.

She recalled her mother and the day before.

She was alone.

She had the luxury of Koutarou and the maids assisting her, but she had also lost something.

She had no intention of letting anyone else experience that. She could proudly call that her form of justice.

And the day before, she had realized she was alone in another way.

She had been tested during Kagami and Hunter's battle.

Hunter had commented on Horinouchi and Kagami's relationship and on the fact that Horinouchi was not intervening in the battle.

...She said I wouldn't summon my Frame.

After all, if Hunter had defeated Kagami, Horinouchi would have secured her spot at #4.

Horinouchi had tried to deny it.

Her Suzaku had not been in top form at the time.

And she had already accepted her drop to #5.

She had not wanted Hunter to call her a coward without knowing those things.

She had had her reasons.

But then Kagami had responded to Hunter's comments.

"That is the reality of this world, isn't it?"

She had been exactly right.

...But...

But what?

Did I want to say I wasn't like that?

I'm not, but I felt there was no point in saying so.

If I said I wasn't, then I would have had no choice but to join the battle.

But Suzaku wasn't in top form and I had accepted my drop to #5.

So I couldn't say I wasn't like that.

But how did Kagami interpret that?

When she saw that I couldn't say anything, she must have concluded those were the rules of this world. She must have concluded I would focus on my own rank and cast her aside even if something happened to her. She must have concluded I agreed with that.

And Kagami had continued to fight.

It had felt like she was telling Horinouchi not to worry about it. She had said there was nothing to worry about because those were the rules of this world.

Horinouchi had been taking advantage of her.

She had wanted to say she was not like that.

...But...

Her thoughts were running in circles now.

Was it cowardly to want to fight in top form?

She had not known what to do and had ultimately left everything to Kagami. She had known how

powerful Kagami was, so she had assumed the girl would have the upper hand.

...Or am I just shoving excuses into my own memories after the fact?

As a result, Kagami's Magino Frame had been destroyed and she was resting.

The headmaster was treating the two of them as a unit, so Horinouchi was here now.

In a way, Hunter had been exactly right.

Horinouchi and Kagami were a unit, but Horinouchi had kept her #4 spot and she was facing Hunter now.

It might have been easier had she simply helped out the day before, but...

"Honestly."

That thought was more of her silly pride.

She did not want to be seen as cowardly. That alone she clung to with all her might.

But she had not taken action when she should have the day before.

Kagami had fortunately not been badly injured, but had given Horinouchi a certain thought.

...I need to take responsibility for the result of my silly pride.

This too was probably a part of that same silly pride.

Wouldn't it have been better to be a coward? If she would only accept that, she could have faced this battle as herself instead of thinking about Kagami.

...But you could say I was the one that injured her.

If Kagami had won, Horinouchi was sure she would have said the victory belonged to both of them. That was just how generous a character Kagami was. So...

"I will defeat you."

Then she would return that victory to Kagami. But only after apologizing for how she had acted the day before.

The headmaster said they were a unit, but that did not feel right to her. So to make up for her cowardice, she would accept a drop to #5.

She had thought of that the night before, but…

"Horinouchi." The ends of Hunter's eyebrows were lowered. "If possible, I want you to watch over those of us in the top three as we battle each other."

She gave a smile of resignation.

"I want you two to be a barrier against everyone ranked below you."

"Why?"

"Well." Hunter continued with the morning sun shining on her from the side. "I don't want anyone else to do what I did."

Yes, thought Horinouchi.

Just as she had her own form of justice, so did this other girl.

Hunter had to be just as alone as she was. So…

“I cannot agree to that.”

I won’t let anyone feel the way I do. If Hunter claims to be the same, then I have to make sure this does not become a battle to see who is the most unfortunate.

“Now, then.”

After exchanging small smiles, they opened spell circles containing abbreviated programs for tactical instructions and various divine protections.

And…

“Summon Normal Frame!”

Koutarou got to work after seeing Horinouchi off.

He was in the headmaster’s office.

He had delivered something for his master, Horinouchi.

It was not that he was not worried about that girl. In fact, he was extremely worried. Especially after

what the maids had said that morning.

“If Lady Mitsuru loses, it will be your fault, head butler!”

“I will hold a grudge against you if that happens. Please make up for that grudge!”

“If Lady Mitsuru wins, make sure to thank her, head butler!”

When he had heard that, he had felt a need to ask something.

“Just for future reference, who will be responsible if she wins?”

“That will be due to her own skill.”

That answer had told him just how unfair middle management jobs could be.

...But at least they didn’t say her victory would be due to their support.

If the maids had been that rude, I would have been forced to show them my true power. Yes, I would have

had to use all of my persuasive power to convince them they were wrong. I can't exactly beat them in attack power, after all.

At any rate, he would provide absolute support to his master.

At the same time, his master disliked not doing what she was supposed to. She hated it. She loathed it. That was clear from how angry Kagami and Hunter's exchange had made her.

She must have wanted to join that battle yesterday. Due to her excessive sense of duty. Yes. Certainly not just because she wanted to fight someone.

That was why she had a butler like him.

His duty was to act in his master's stead.

Of the things she was supposed to do today, this was the one he could do for her.

The item he had delivered was placed on the reception table. It was held in a damp-proof and insulated hard case. The spell circle on its surface

said “HSKK-Shihouin0329”.

“This is the new summer version of the flower seeds Lady Mitsuru created in the lab. The previous ones…”

“The reports are ready. Our girls worked hard on that.”

He looked down and saw a box full of handwritten papers on the table. It had not been there before, but this was a den of witches. There were many different ways for objects to suddenly appear: teleportation, concealment, cognizance alteration, ultra high-speed movement, *etc.*

All he needed to do was pick up the cardboard box.

When he lifted it up, he detected the scent of a summer flower from within, but…

“Oh?”

The headmaster looked out the southern window where two low rumblings descended from the sky.

“Have they started already?” he asked.

“Shouldn’t you be out there to help?”

“They will be fighting at sea or at high altitude to prevent any damage to the surface this time. I wouldn’t be able to keep up.”

“Did you get an insurance payment for your car?”

“That was a loaner. …It was my third one, so they told me to do business with someone else next time.”

“A well-maintained vehicle really is a valuable thing.”

The headmaster smiled but then looked away from the window. Still smiling and with a distant rumbling in the background, she turned back toward Koutarou.

“Can you tell what’s happening from the sound alone?”

“Yes. Any true defender can.”

“Then,” said the headmaster as she relaxed her shoulders. “Miss Horinouchi is the rapid fire type while Miss Hunter is the one-hit win type. But since

Miss Hunter's defenses are quite good, Miss Horinouchi is going to have some trouble."

"If possible, I wish she had a mid-range attacker with her."

"Yes." The headmaster smiled bitterly. "I think Mitsuyo would have suggested that to her, though."

"She-..."

Just as he prepared to respond, the headmaster began to shake.

She was coughing.

"Lady Headmaster!"

In order to run over, Koutarou started putting the box back on the table, but...

"I'm fine."

The hand held out to stop him briefly grew transparent.

But had he only imagined it? She smiled with her eyebrows raised and took a breath.

“I’m fine. I’m not going to leave until I have fulfilled the promise I made.”

Chapter 13: Battle in the Witches' Sky

Chapter 13

“Battle in the Witches’ Sky”

The warm welcome of a Shinto bombardment

The warm welcome of a Shinto bombardment

Horinouchi felt there were a number of subtleties to this battle.

She was over the sea, about fifteen kilometers south of the Uraga Channel. Her altitude was approximately three thousand meters. The sun was out and clouds formed as the temperature rose in the early morning.

The bottoms of the clouds were flat and she was firing on Hunter below that sea of clouds.

...Everything is going well so far!

Hunter was primarily a close-range fighter. With her stability spell, her attacks were just as powerful in midair.

But the sky had no obstacles and an absolute floor like the surface of the earth. When running, there was a great difference in the behavior of someone actually stepping on the floor and someone setting

up an artificial floor with a spell.

On the other hand, Hunter's spell acted just like a real floor, so she was even more stable than when on the ground itself.

Her movements were rough, but each individual step was accurate.

And Horinouchi was aware of all that as she pursued her.

She repeatedly fired Akerindou from a dozen meters away.

"Kh!"

She sealed off her opponent's movements.

...And then I settle this with my Normal Frame!

That was the best strategy she could think of.

Hunter's Magino Frame had a powerful cannon, thick armor, and great mobility. But while her Normal Frame still had powerful armor and the close-range pile bunker was dangerous, the

secondary cannon that used the same power source was not all that powerful.

And even if she could make quick straight-line dashes through the air, her flight spells were slow.

Horinouchi on the other hand could fire rapidly and powerfully even with her Normal Frame and she had excellent mobility. She would not be outdone in anything but armor strength.

...So I can win this if I don't let her use her Magino Frame.

But how was she supposed to do that?

She had a reason to be in a hurry.

Hunter had been falling back to the east and attacking whenever Horinouchi drew close.

Horinouchi had hit her a few times with counterattacks.

Her speed would immediately drop and Horinouchi would gain more ground. To prevent Hunter from charging at her, Horinouchi defended herself with

projectiles and moved forward once more.

She was wearing Hunter down by repeating that pattern.

But there was some resistance and she did not like how the Suzaku would give a strange cry every time Hunter was hit.

...Does it have to shout "weeeeeeeeird!" like some kind of weird bird? Is this thing really the Suzaku?

She decided to mute it and concentrated on firing, but she was more worried by the fact that her hits did not seem to be affecting Hunter much.

...This is dangerous.

She understood that these hits were heating up the girl's Phlogiston Heart.

Which meant...

"Has she calculated out the damage from these hits versus her natural divine protection recovery so she knows the exact amount of heating needed to summon her Magino Frame?"

If so, she was in trouble.

A Phlogiston Heart came down to willpower, but the amount of heat was influenced by the quality of one's emotional excitement.

It was important to have a gap.

Even if one was emotionally excited, it would provide little heating if the emotion came from mere conceit or selfish joy.

It was the struggle against an opponent or the desire to fight despite the damage one had taken that heated up the Phlogiston Heart.

Adversity would heat up the heart.

In that way, even if Hunter was intentionally taking these hits, it would be providing her Phlogiston Heart plenty of heat.

...I may be gaining ground, but I still need to seal off her every movement!

During the battle with Kagami the day before, Hunter had rapidly heated her Phlogiston Heart.

She had appeared with her Magino Frame already summoned, but that too had to be the result of some kind of Phlogiston Heart heating technique.

Horinouchi had wished for an official ranker battle because she did not know what that technique was.

An official battle would set any rank changes in stone and prevent her from escaping any possible drop in rank, but it also meant the heat of their Phlogiston Hearts both began within standard ranges.

Hunter had not immediately summoned her Magino Frame in those conditions, so she had to have some trick for rapidly summoning it.

Horinouchi needed to seal that away.

She could not let Hunter escape on the Magino Frame almost immediately and settle this from afar.

But if the girl managed to build up the heat like this, the result would be the same.

She knew she had to hurry, but...

“You’re distracted, Horinouchi!”

She did not care. She continued firing, made sure the other girl could not escape, and circled around her while firing some more.

“_ _ _ _ _”

She hit Hunter again. The pattern remained unchanged.

But Hunter had intentionally taken the blow.

She had done the same to defend several times already. She would use her stability spell to take the blow on the Hedgehog’s armor and fully deflect the attack.

But this was different.

Hunter was blasted diagonally down and to the left.

She made no attempt to hold her ground.

…She switched off the stability spell!?

…You only get one shot at a surprise attack!

First, Hunter heated up her Phlogiston Heart by getting hit while also learning about the attacks from Horinouchi's Akerindou.

She of course defended, but learning through her body was the fastest way.

So she ended up taking more hits than expected.

The damage could suppress her Phlogiston Heart's heat, so she used the stability spell to let the damage escape through the Hedgehog. But…

…That smarts!

She found it odd that getting hit and letting the damage escape hurt more than absorbing the damage. But after doing that a few times, she learned just what kind of damage it was.

Horinouchi's attacks were a fusion of penetrative power and a solid impact.

At the moment it hit, the arrow-shaped bullets would act like armor-piercing rounds, but as soon as they dug into the opponent's armor, they would

permeate the inside of the opponent using kinetic energy and reinforcement spells.

With just penetrative power, the arrow might pierce straight out the other side.

With just a solid impact, the arrow might be blocked by the armor.

To achieve both, the power she fired was longer than otherwise necessary.

The tip contained the penetrative power and the back contained the impact power.

That was the true purpose of the arrow shape.

These were not bullets or shells and they were not shaped that way just to follow the shrine maiden theme. They had gained that shape as she sought the perfect form to bring her victory.

“And that’s why she goes all-out on offense instead of defense. This is no laughing matter!”

Horinouchi’s full-power blast was probably the only thing that could compare to the pure power of the

swing-by cannon blasts fired by the cannon form of the Hedgehog's Magino Frame.

The only flaw was the difficulty of maintaining the initial speed. Unlike Hunter's swing-by method, Horinouchi's shots did not accelerate or maintain their speed midflight, so Hunter had the advantage at longer ranges.

But even so…

…She can act alone as a gunner with no backup.

Hunter understood what that meant.

This fighting style was meant for the Black Witch.

When the Black Witch descended toward Earth, Horinouchi would fire on and defeat her from the surface.

…Yes, I understand quite well.

Firing on an enemy from a safe location was not the only advantage of long-range attacks.

When one had something to protect behind them, a

long-range gunner could defend it all.

Most witches had realized that fact.

But who took part in Hexennacht was determined by the ranker battles, so they had all obtained armor and mobility to achieve victory against other witches. Even the gunners were skilled in close-range attack methods.

If all they had to do was fire on the Black Witch from afar, that would not have been necessary.

But what was this before Hunter's eyes?

Even if Horinouchi could fly, she had little armor and her only close-range support weapon was an ether sword.

That girl had ranked at #4 with something solely designed to face the Black Witch.

Each and every shot hurt.

But that was exactly why Hunter would push her aside here.

She would defeat Horinouchi to tell her this method was not enough. She would completely crush her and make sure she never looked up again. After all…

"I also have something behind me to protect!"

Hunter had a plan.

She had been using her stability spell whenever she defended or was hit, but she would deactivate it for just one hit.

And she did so.

She received the blow on the Hedgehog, but she did not let the damage escape. She angled the armor linked to her left arm toward the sky and took the blow there.

…Down and to the right!

She was blasted through the air.

It happened suddenly and Horinouchi would be unable to keep up after sensing the resistance of

Hunter's armor each time. Thinking that Horinouchi would have lost sight of her, Hunter looked to the figure up above.

...Here I go!

She rapidly swung her body left and right as she raced upwards through the sky.

The Hedgehog was in its pile bunker form. The attack was nothing compared to the Magino Frame canon, but at close-range, it would break through the enemy's defense barrier and then destroy the Frame with a solid blow during the reverse permeation that followed. The concept was similar to Horinouchi's arrows, but...

"——————"

As she ascended, she saw something there: Horinouchi.

But the girl overhead was not looking down at her.

She was looking up at the heavens.

She was looking up at the yellowish sky of early

morning that had not quite grown blue yet.

The moon floated in the center of it.

Horinouchi aimed Akerindou straight up while looking to the moon.

She was positioned to fire on the moon and her power arm's fingers were on Akerindou's bowstring.

"Akerindou – Activate Firing Barrier."

The bowstring rang several times in the sky as if being plucked.

At the same time, a great celestial sphere appeared below the shrine maiden's feet.

It had taken form by pointing the bow downwards and rotating it several times. It all looked something like an umbrella's framework and it covered the 180 degrees around the shrine maiden's feet, but Hunter noticed a certain fact.

An arrow was not being fired from Akerindou's

acceleration pathway with each plucking sound.

And after one more shot, a great sound rang out.

“Barrier sublimation.”

As soon as she spoke those words, all of her actions came to fruition.

Arrows were fired in all 180 degrees from the hemisphere opened below her.

She did not need to find her opponent.

She simply fired a massive number of arrows.

Horinouchi had trouble with surprise attacks.

Part of it had to do with her personality, but even if she had difficulties there, she could not stop her enemies from using them. So she wanted a countermeasure, but her defenses were not quite enough for that.

She had her three-arrow shield and some variations, but the most effective method was offense.

A wall was not enough to convince her enemy they could not get close.

A wall could be taken away.

That left offense.

A barrage was the only option.

She had to fire everywhere at once. She had a few difference variations for that and multiplying her rapid-fire shots was one of those. She had used that type against Kagami the other day because it was effective in a fluid battlefield with an enemy that moved a lot at long-range.

But this was different. This was for when the enemy was making a surprise attack from an unknown location.

As long as she knew the general direction…

…I just have to fire everything in that direction.

If she had the time, she could set it up for all 360 degrees, but it was hard to know how long it would take the enemy to approach and she had seen

Hunter jump downwards. Her time limit for constructing the barrier had been until Hunter entered her warning range.

That had given her 180 degrees and she fired that barrage.

“How about that!?”

The arrows of light flew toward the sky and ocean below.

She saw her opponent beyond that light.

Would Hunter evade or defend? Horinouchi would make the finishing blow once she saw which action Hunter took.

She aimed Akerindou downwards and drew the bowstring. The Suzaku was in top form on her shoulder, so she muted it.

She saw Hunter make her move, but it was neither defense nor evasion.

She stood still in midair and she did so horizontally as if to face Horinouchi.

...Is she...?

Horinouchi realized what she was doing. The Hedgehog on her left arm was in pile bunker mode and she was preparing to swing it.

"Ohhh!"

She dashed up toward Horinouchi in midair and thrust the Hedgehog out toward her.

"...!"

Horinouchi could predict what would happen, so she fired without waiting to see.

Hunter was impressed by Horinouchi's decision.

...She fired again? She really is crazy about offense!

Hunter was currently dealing with the barrage.

She had to hurry. The barrage had yet to spread out much and the arrows had yet to draw out all of their power.

The firing barrier was scattering and some ether

light remained.

“Hedgehog!”

She slammed the pile bunker in.

The ejected stake was an ether spear. It was fired from the acceleration pathway at the extreme close range of five meters, but its tip could pierce through anything and then strike it with a solid blow.

And since it was made of ether…

…It can permeate the ether barrier and arrows!

The barrier had yet to fully scatter and the arrows had yet to fully expand, so what would happen if she struck now?

“I can detonate them!”

Normally, she would have pulled the spear back, but she did not.

She purged the spear.

A moment later, she supplied a certain technique to the ether spear tip: her stability spell.

The barrier was made to synchronize with a "surface" located elsewhere. Normally that surface was the ground or the swing-by satellite, but here she used...

...This airspace itself!

She created a "surface" by capturing the empty space up ahead in a barrier.

The spear pierced through it and tore into the barrage.

In that instant, the tactile feedback in her left arm felt the fleshy sensation of penetrating that surface.

The spear struck the arrows and the ether light of the barrier binding them together. The arrows and barrier were treated as one and the same.

As a result, her blow permeated every last one of Horinouchi's arrows.

After a brief moment, everything exploded.

The arrows had yet to spread out, so their power turned to light and scattered in 180 degrees around.

“Ohh…”

Hunter formed a new ether stake inside the Hedgehog and leaped straight up.

The explosion, the intense noise, and the roar of scattering wind were all left behind as she continued upwards with a single task in mind.

Targeting the enemy came first, but…

…She’s already firing at me!

As soon as she passed through the space taken up by the barrage, she found something right in front of her: Horinouchi’s arrow.

The attack had been drawn to the limit and fired with perfect accuracy.

Horinouchi nocked the next arrow.

She did so on reflex, but it ended up saving her.

She had fired her best shot down toward Hunter.

It had been a perfectly aimed shot from close range

and it was the best possible shot using her Normal Frame.

But she knew one thing for sure.

...Someone on my level will find a way to deal with it!

And that was exactly what happened.

Hunter reacted to the arrow that flew straight toward the very center of her chest.

It scored a direct hit, the solid sound of impact rang out, and Hunter's Normal Frame was destroyed.

Hunter used the Karate-style, so even though her jacket and suit appeared to be made of cloth, they were actually ether. So they all shattered like glass and scattered as fragments of light.

But that was not all.

Ether light burst from the Hedgehog Device's dividing lines and it exploded.

It broke apart.

But Horinouchi knew that Hunter had previously

taken her attacks intentionally to heat up her Phlogiston Heart.

Hunter most likely had a defense spell to allow the damage to escape.

...In that case...

Horinouchi's arrow was meant to pierce Hunter's armor and permeate its damage through her.

But what if Hunter had destroyed her own armor just beforehand?

She could see the answer before her.

Hunter's left hand grabbed something amid the fragments of light.

It was the stake of light that had been loaded inside the Hedgehog.

Its presence meant her Normal Frame had not been fully destroyed. And...

"She's repairing it!?"

A series of instants followed. Her left arm came first,

next was the power arm that connected to the Hedgehog, and then came her left shoulder. The jacket, inner suit, the other arm, and the Hedgehog's base all appeared at the same time.

Finally, the sensor headwear took its position and reset itself with a spray of light.

"You used your accumulated heat to repair it!?"

"Yeah, that's right. It'll delay summoning my Magino Frame, but it was worth it!"

After all, she had reconstructed her Normal Frame from extreme close range.

"I'm close enough to reach you!"

Hunter attacked with a shield bash using the Hedgehog.

The stake inside had yet to fully form, but the attack still reached.

...It hit!

Horinouchi defended, but it was still a solid blow. The clash of metal on metal sounded loudly.

“Kh.”

Horinouchi groaned and fell back.

She was fast and it seemed unfair to move that fast when retreating, but complaining would not help. She most likely had that speed because she was using the Suzaku as her servant. This time, it was Hunter’s turn to pursue.

She ran through the air after her enemy.

Arrows flew her way, but they were clearly not meant to hit. They were meant to hold her back long enough for Horinouchi to regain her position. In other words, Horinouchi was not ready for a proper attack.

But Hunter was.

And so she said the same thing she had before.

“You’re distracted, Horinouchi!”

Calm down, Horinouchi told herself.

The battle had turned in Hunter's favor and Horinouchi had been forced into the kind of defensive battle she had trouble with. Panicking would not help and she could not simply put up with this.

...I need to calm down, stop her, and fight back!

After speaking those words in her heart, she was reminded of where her weaknesses were: close-range battles, defense, and assaults.

If she had the power to handle those things, she could likely win.

But of course, that was impossible. After all, she was not perfect. *...But if I had an attacker to work with me...*

She knew who that would be, but...

"...!"

I'm asking for the impossible, she told herself while attempting to maintain her rhythm of evasion and retreat. By moving at her own pace, she could draw her opponent's movements into that pace and draw the battlefield toward herself.

She had to win here. After all…

"I've already received some help."

The spell circle next to her face contained a certain report.

Koutarou had sent it and it came from Kagami.

Koutarou had given it to her the night before after picking Kagami up. At first glance, it was the same as the battle opponent report put together by Koutarou and the maids, but the contents were different.

It did not simply inform her of the opponent's combat ability. It contained the reality of fighting against that opponent. In other words, the opponent's movements, reaction speed, ether

consumption rate, and idiosyncrasies.

“What is this?”

She had been surprised by the detailed information the night before and Koutarou had bowed and said the following:

“I am embarrassed to admit we were not the ones to produce this report.”

“Then who did?”

Without raising his head, he had placed a hand on his chest.

“Before the battle, Lady Kagami asked me to record this information.”

“Why?”

“She said it would come in handy when you fought Lady Hunter.”

Koutarou’s immediate answer had likely been Kagami’s immediate answer.

In the battle so far and in the current defensive

battle, Kagami's information had come in handy.

Horinouchi managed to catch her breath and swung her legs in midair to stabilize her movements. Hunter's attack was coming, but…

…This is my chance!

Hunter used the heat of her Phlogiston Heart to remake her Normal Frame, thought Horinouchi.

The girl had been building up the heat needed to construct her Magino Frame, so the amount consumed to redo her Normal Frame would not buy Horinouchi much time.

But, she thought. *She can't summon her Magino Frame just yet.*

So if Horinouchi shifted to offense here…

…I didn't waste any ether, so I will be able to summon my Magino Frame first!

Their positions were reversed.

Hunter's only option was to attack.

But Horinouchi did not have the defenses needed to fight a defensive battle when that girl was on the attack.

So it all came down to how she fought. Could she endure Hunter's attacks long enough to summon her Magino Frame?

If she made the wrong move, Hunter could build up her heat again and summon her Magino Frame first.

"It all comes down to this!"

Just as Horinouchi made up her mind, Hunter charged right in front of her. Light was already building up inside the Hedgehog.

That light created an ether stake.

The other girl was also ready to end this here.

Chapter 14: There Lies Justice

Chapter 14

“There Lies Justice”

When you’ve been hit
Is the perfect time

When you've been hit

Is the perfect time

Hunter saw an arrow strike arriving from straight ahead.

It did not use her opponent's full power, but it was powerful enough for a direct hit to destroy her armor and stop her charge.

But if she dodged the arrow, she could not get any closer to Horinouchi, so Hunter transformed the Hedgehog from its pile bunker form to its shield form.

"Willpower!"

She held the armor diagonally so the arrow would hit it.

The action was much like a counterattack blow. She had done so countless times in battle and she had learned it as part of her deflection training, but...

…I've never done it while moving forward so quickly or against someone as attack-obsessed as her!

It felt a lot like deflecting a tank shell with a pot lid. The Hedgehog's thick armor of course gave her some peace of mind, but…

"Wah!"

It hit.

The impact reached her. She had meant to knock it upwards while remaining on a nearly level plane herself, but then the great crashing sound reached her.

…This is really pushing me!

The strike had knocked her down further than she had expected.

The arrow had been worn down by the collision and its impact power had permeated her. Her arm was trembling and her body was about to collapse forward.

She briefly considered following that motion and

circling around from below, but…

…The next firing barrier is already up!?

The barrier was probably meant for defense or assistance and a volley spell to attack outside the barrier had already opened at her feet.

If Hunter moved in like before, Horinouchi would make another counterattack, so…

“Here goes.”

With her body still knocked down a little, Hunter opened a stability spell directly below her chest, but it was not meant for stepping on.

…Punch!

Her right fist struck the “floor” to force her still-sinking body back up.

And by leaving her left arm behind as she moved forward, the Hedgehog was automatically pulled back.

Then a different arrow arrived. It had been fired

while the barrier was being created. Hunter could hardly believe anyone could fire such powerful attacks in such quick succession, but that was just the kind of opponent she was up against. She also took issue with how the shot was aimed at the face.

Meanwhile, Hunter opened a stability spell next to her head and used a sideways headbutt to slide her position to the side a little.

The arrow passed right by her cheek and her hair scattered through the wind.

“Hedgehog!”

She performed a shield bash, but the Hedgehog had an accelerator on the back. It was meant for flight assistance and became the main thruster for the Magino Frame, but it could also provide acceleration for a physical blow.

“This should be plenty!”

Hunter saw Horinouchi move back and raise her

hand.

“Three Arrows!”

That defense barrier was made from three arrows and breaking through meant destroying each individual arrow, but…

…You’ve switched to defense, have you!?

“That’s fine with me!”

Hunter threw forward her shield bash.

As soon as it hit, she operated the mount that attached the Hedgehog to her arm. She released the slide rail meant to soften the Hedgehog’s recoil. That meant her body was pulled forward by the recoil, and…

“Two.”

She formed a fist with her right arm’s power hand and used the recoil and her footing to throw a punch.

It hit.

Light sprayed into the sky and the second arrow was

destroyed.

The rest was easy. Resetting the Hedgehog's slide rail on her left arm would pull the Hedgehog back for another punch.

And if she released the rail again and sent the Hedgehog forward using its accelerator…

"And the pile bunker for three!"

In the instant the third arrow shattered, Horinouchi took action.

She purged the emitter for Akerindou's ether bowstring from the base of the grip.

…This is Akerindou's core.

When Akerindou was formed, that bowstring was created as the central coordinate for the motors.

Not only was it the center of the grip, but the bow could not be fired without its string. In fact, as long as she had the ether bowstring, she could just barely

create a bow around it.

It was the same as Hunter's ether stake.

Currently, the ether bowstring vanished from Akerindou. Akerindou would no longer function as a bow, but its motors still worked enough to reinforce the small amount of armor. Its incomplete form had become a shield.

Also, the ether bowstring emitter now produced an ether sword.

By shortening and solidifying the bowstring's output, it truly did become a sword.

This was her emergency close-quarters weapon and she was properly trained in its usage.

Ahead of her were the fragments of the three arrows she had already fired and an ether stake tearing through the air. Would Hunter continue forward or not? And would Horinouchi's preparations to counterattack pay off?

...From here on...

As soon as that thought entered Horinouchi's mind, the ether sword and Akerindou were both destroyed.

"What!?"

This was not right.

Hunter's attack had yet to reach her.

"You're too naïve!"

When she heard Hunter's voice, she noticed the ether light of the three arrows had scattered through the surrounding space.

...Did she permeate her strike through the ether fragments!?

It was the same method she had used to destroy Horinouchi's barrier before. Hunter's ether stake was made to penetrate and then permeate its impact throughout whatever it hit. Horinouchi's arrows did the same, but Hunter would create a "surface" with her stability spell to expand the range of the permeation.

...And that lets her strike cover a wide area of space, doesn't it!?

That was exactly what happened.

Hunter's ether stake pierced even deeper through the glowing mist of the three shattered arrows.

"Hedgehog!"

The light of acceleration burst from the thruster on the back of Hunter's Device.

She was seven meters away, which was close range for a witch, and she used the widened range of her pile bunker strike to break the Device that Horinouchi was using as a shield.

Akerindou's surface broke apart.

"Ah!"

The bow form bent down the center and the entire Device broke in two.

Hunter did not overlook this opportunity.

She moved toward Horinouchi's Akerindou that was not yet fully broken.

"Right!"

As she pulled back the Hedgehog, she made a punch with her right power hand.

Horinouchi's body was already floating up a bit from the previous blow.

Ether light and a sound of impact burst out and Akerindou's central wheel was broken along with the armor on the surface.

Horinouchi was knocked away with the broken sword and bow still in her hands.

This sent the girl away, but Hunter was not going to let her escape. She intended to end this here, so she prepared the finishing blow.

"Hedgehog!"

She pursued Horinouchi to make another pile bunker strike. Another of those permeating impacts would fully destroy her Frame.

“Prepare pile bunker!”

The ether stake was fully extended, so she pulled it back while running through the air and shouting.

But then a spell circle hopped up from her shoulder. That was a frantic movement from her hedgehog servant and a voice arrived from HQ.

“Representative Hunter! Below you!”

...Below!?

She quickly twisted her body.

She did not know what this was about, but it was some advice from the people monitoring her. She pulled the Hedgehog close as a shield, but she did not slow her forward movement.

“Eh?”

That was when she noticed it.

When she looked directly below her, she saw the volley barrier Horinouchi had prepared earlier.

Since it was located below, it had not been caught in

the destruction of the three arrows and had thus been abandoned there, but…

…It's pointing this way!?

The hemispherical barrier was falling apart and scattering, but the destruction was clearly pointing the arrows up toward her.

But what did that matter? The barrier was already destroyed and Horinouchi needed to use her bowstring in quick succession to actually fire the volley. So…

"Don't tell me…"

Two things seemed off to Hunter.

The first had to do with her earlier charge. Why had Horinouchi used her Three Arrows Shield and focused on defense?

Was it because her attack barrier had gone to waste when Hunter had not escaped downwards?

The second had to do with the arrow Horinouchi had fired toward Hunter's face earlier.

…That was…

She understood now.

The three arrows had been a way to keep her from looking down.

The arrow toward the face had been to create a blind spot.

…She already fired an arrow, didn't she!?

She had placed it inside the attack barrier down below.

Even as the barrier collapsed and fell apart, it was most likely being controlled. That was why Horinouchi had kept Akerindou intact and running even after removing its ether bowstring emitter. She had synced the barrier with Akerindou and was having it aim toward Hunter.

"_ _ _ _ _"

She could see Horinouchi injured and damaged up ahead, but the girl had a smile on her lips.

And a moment later…

“Dammit!”

An attack came from directly below.

The single shot fired from the collapsing attack barrier and passed through the spell circle for a guidance spell, but…

…It isn’t aimed at me!

It hit the ether stake. As she pulled the stake back, it was pierced through by a vertical attack.

And that was not all.

Horinouchi spread her arms up ahead.

She held the partially broken ether bowstring emitter in her left hand as a sword, but she now returned it to its bowstring form.

“Sing!”

Hunter heard the ringing of a large shrine bell.

She knew what was happening. All the damage had fully heated Horinouchi's Phlogiston Heart.

She had planned to take that damage which was quite a gamble for someone with no defensive strength, but she had pulled it off.

The Hedgehog's ether stake exploded at the end of Hunter's left arm.

"Horinouchi!"

She saw something being constructed in the center of her vision.

The broken Akerindou was becoming a much larger structure. The rapid ringing of a large shrine bell accompanied the construction of motors around the ether bowstring that connected Horinouchi's arms. And...

"Magino Frame – Akerindou!"

As soon as the five hundred meter bow was completed, it fired a great blast toward Hunter.

The Magino Frame's main cannon scored a direct hit from point-blank range.

The explosion of light became a spray of ether and a surge of destruction. The wind blew and Horinouchi frowned at the fierce rocking of the Magino Frame she stood on.

...That may have been a little too much.

Clouds of ether surrounded the Akerindou. Ether reaction light raced through them like lightning. They were thick, but the morning sunlight shined on them from the east and a pale yellow light made it through to her.

If not for the wind, noise, and movement, it would have felt like being wrapped in luxurious silk.

But then something appeared in her vision. It appeared inside the ether clouds letting the sunlight through.

...A shadow!?

No, "shadow" was not the right term for something

so large.

It was just as large as the Akerindou she stood on.

“The Hedgehog!?”

Horinouchi saw something to port that she would much rather have not seen.

It was in its cannon form and Hunter stood on top of it as it completed its construction.

She too was constructing her Form and she was out of breath.

“Horinouchi!”

Horinouchi tried to move away, but her position was poor.

...She deflected it, didn’t she!?

It had been a direct hit, but that had heated up the other girl’s Phlogiston Heart.

She had likely used her Normal Device as a shield to gain a short period of breathing room.

And she had not mistaken the order in which to summon her Magino Device. Even as she formed the shell as the core, she had likely already started on the radome that determined her location.

With that information, the US military could support her.

The silent cooperation between her and her comrades had made one crucial accomplishment.

During the direct hit, Hunter had used an instantaneous swing-by to escape.

It had been a split-second decision like a quick-draw and it had been a gamble since she could not have checked what direction she would be escaping to.

But it had saved her.

The rest came down to Hunter's willpower. Even with that great strike closing in on her, she had trusted in her comrades and remained focused on victory.

Just like Horinouchi, she had obtained the heat she

needed from the most hopeless situation and used that to summon her Magino Frame.

Horinouchi belatedly recalled that Hunter was a high-level ranker and even ranked higher than Horinouchi herself.

The Hedgehog was summoned with priority on the acceleration pathway. The shell was already visible at the back.

“I…!”

Horinouchi could not turn the Akerindou around fast enough as Hunter raised her voice.

“I win!”

Just as she fired, Hunter saw some movement.

It came from a sudden intruder.

She and Horinouchi should have been the only two witches with the only two giant silhouettes in that sky, but…

...Is that...?

A giant white and blue sword was flying her way, but she could not stop the firing process now.

The extreme close-range blast was being made without the acceleration pathway complete, but it should have been enough to tear through the Akerindou's thinly-armored side.

But instead, she heard a solid sound.

The sky roared, light burst, and the shell shattered in midair.

It had been blocked by the great sword's armor, so she shouted the name of the blue and white Magino Device and of its owner.

"Kagami Kagami...and Dikai-whatever!?"

Horinouchi watched on in a daze until the Suzaku gave a joyous whistle on her shoulder.

She snapped back to her senses and looked over at

the Suzaku.

“Wh-what was that whistle? No bird sounds like that.”

“Cock-a-doodle-doooooo!”

It made a fake-sounding rooster cry, so was it really the Suzaku?

But that was not what mattered.

Up ahead, something had thrust up into the ether clouds scattering between Horinouchi and Hunter.

“Dikai-whatever!”

“It’s Dikaiosyne. You really do have a bad memory.”

That comment came from the individual standing on the shell formation area that made up the pommel of the great sword.

It was Kagami. She was naturally wearing her Magino Form Holy Knight outfit and she looked back at Horinouchi over her shoulder.

“Are you okay, um…”

She thought for a second and nodded.

“Manko?”

“And you say *I* have a bad memory!?”

Chapter 15: There Lies a Rebuke

Chapter 15

“There Lies a Rebuke”

A second meeting
Is known as a reunion

A second meeting

Is known as a reunion

Koutarou stopped just before leaving the headmaster's office.

The support maids had sent a report informing him that Kagami had arrived on the battlefield.

...Honestly. Very well done.

He had already known she was on the way to the battlefield. After all...

"Lady Headmaster, about that paperwork..."

A few pieces of paperwork were lined up on the headmaster's desk.

They included an application to join the school and an acceptance form. The headmaster smiled bitterly as she commented on them.

"Yes, well...she is a silly girl. Just look at this."

She pushed forward a paper containing the details needed to purchase a uniform.

“She said she needed to ‘officially become a student’ before going to save her, so she even had her measurements taken for the uniform before leaving.”

The noise in the sky had increased considerably, so the windows rattled and the ceiling creaked as the headmaster said one thing more “But I’m glad they seem to be having so much fun.”

Horinouchi asked a question of the person before her eyes.

“Kagami.”

She did not know what answer she would get and that made her uneasy.

“How!?”

How could she have decided to come here?

…How could you ever think to come save me when I didn't join the battle yesterday?

That was what her question had meant, but the holy knight crossed her arms and nodded.

"It is simple, Horinouchi. Your battle was producing an awful lot of stray shots."

…Stray shots?

Something about that answer seemed off, but Kagami kept going with her gaze focused far to the east.

"As I was approaching the battlefield, I decided I needed to understand the struggles you two had gone through, so I got myself worked up, let your stray shots hit my Normal Frame, and accidentally filled up my transformation gauge."

…Now she's bragging about how weird she is!?

That was not what she had been asking.

To be honest, both Hunter and Kagami fell into the "weird" category as far as she was concerned, so she

had just assumed they could make the shift to Magino Frame somehow or another.

But that was not what she had been asking.

“Then let me change my question.”

With that opening, she changed the question word to leave no room for confusion.

“Why?”

“Oh, that is obvious, Horinouchi.”

Kagami’s tone seemed to say “Oh, is that what you were asking?”

“Yesterday on the pier, you listened to and believed what I said, and you worried about me despite putting on a mask of displeasure.”

…But…

She had no distinct memory of whether she had been worried or not, but…

…Isn’t that the obvious reaction?

Kagami had claimed to be a resident of another

world who had gone beyond reckless, made several mistakes, and came to see the destruction those mistakes had caused. She had claimed her mission was to stop that destruction even if it meant killing her own sister.

The power she had demonstrated supported those claims and left Horinouchi with no choice but to believe her. And when looking at it from her point of view, how could one not worry for her? But…

"I…"

She had not said that.

In fact, her actions had told a different story when she had not helped her.

She had shown her own cowardice back then, and yet…

"You were worried for me," said Kagami. "And I am not about to overlook that."

And…

"I heard your story as well."

Koutarou had told her what had happened to Horinouchi and her mother ten years before, so…

“I must take responsibility for bringing you such sorrow.”

“I don’t need you to-…!”

“Enough.”

Kagami turned toward their enemy on the great sword that acted as a barrier.

“This is an issue of what I feel is necessary.”

Now then, thought Kagami as she faced Hunter.

This was her first time seeing the girl’s completed Magino Frame.

…It looks a lot like a fighter jet. That’s pretty cool. Well done, America.

“Heh heh. What are you going to do, Hunter?”

“This just means there’s going to be one more injured person in the end, so it doesn’t matter much

to me. ...Are you sure you want to do this?”

“I am.”

Kagami tilted Dikaiosyne horizontally.

The light visible at the back of Hunter’s Magino Device likely meant the thrusters were ready to go.

...This is about to develop into a high speed battle.

Kagami spoke while opening up her own main thruster.

“Horinouchi.”

That girl was a good person. She had believed the story of Kagami’s past even though it sounded like nonsense. So...

“Horinouchi, if you are willing to trust in what I told you.”

...I don’t even need to ask.

“Then I hope you can trust me now, too.”

Koutarou drove his loaner car northward around Tokyo Bay.

His destination was Chiba and the destroyed Bousou Peninsula.

Most of the region was nothing but ruins, but it was still a useful location as the "southeast" of the Japanese mainland.

...Yesterday, her shell got through because she aimed for the eastern gap.

He had communications equipment and spell strengthening devices inside the car, so by driving there, he could fill the hole in the country's detection and perception network. He also received word from their headquarters.

"Head Butler! Lady Mitsuru is currently travelling east at 270 kph from 120 km west of the United States! But the readings for the Rank 3 enemy and Lady Mitsuru's partner have pulled away at even greater speed and have arrived over the United States!"

That isn't good, was his view of that.

...Miss Hunter is probably on her way to a starting point for her swing-by movement.

That method gave her truly unmatchable speed. The one flaw was the need to use a satellite as a foothold.

...To increase safety and accuracy when moving, the coordinates need to be as even as possible.

That meant she had to be very exact in her actions.

Sometimes she would be able to move from one swing-by to another and other times there would not be any around. This was the latter case.

Kagami had caught on and started pursuit. She was trying to drive Hunter off course before she could reach the starting point.

The information from headquarters displayed the three witches' movements inside a spell circle. They had all arrived on America's west coast and Hunter and Kagami were moving far out ahead. But Hunter's course would waver at times.

“Is Lady Kagami battling that heavy armor?”

She was using an outdated Holy Knight-style, she was fighting on her own, and yet she was taking on someone with the backing of the cutting-edge US military.

…Just how many battles has she fought in?

A smile appeared on his lips as he did some adlibbed driving along the destroyed road.

The headmaster had been exactly right.

This was fun. After all…

“Understood, HQ.”

Now that he had grasped the situation and where it was headed, he spoke to the maids working in the support base below the headquarters.

“Change Lady Mitsuru’s partner’s designation to ‘Miss Kagami’. I have a feeling we’re going to be working with her for quite some time.”

“Understood,” replied a maid as the label on the

spell circle changed.

After confirming that, he gave additional instructions since the enemy had the support of the US military.

“Measure their locations using our group’s industrial satellites or other nations’ observation points. If the United States is supporting the enemy with their military power, then…”

Theirs would not be military power, but…

“We will provide the support of the Horinouchi Group from the entire surface of the earth.”

“Kagami! I’m getting support from my people, so I’ll send that to you!”

Kagami nodded at the transmission arriving over a spell circle.

She saw a map of the west coast and central region of the United States with their trajectories added on. Also…

...Are those the paths of as many satellites as they could find!?

"You have some excellent people, Horinouchi."

"They don't have any military power, but they have joined with the IZUMO conglomerate to spread a Shinto-based trade network to every part of the world. So as long as we're over the land, our non-spell observation and trajectory predictions can sometimes surpass even America's!"

"That is much appreciated," muttered Kagami as she continued firing.

She was using her secondary cannons.

Currently, Hunter's Magino Frame and Kagami's Dikaiosyne were fighting a high-speed battle while moving faster than the speed of sound.

They did not have time to use their main cannons, so Kagami was using her secondary cannons to fire beams of light with a high-level homing ability. The bluish-white lines of light curved through the air

and took punching trajectories toward Hunter.

Hunter used her own secondary cannons to scatter countless bullets.

They were slow, but they made for dangerous obstacles.

Kagami opened a spell circle to track the entire barrage at once. She swept them all aside with the homing beams of light and then aimed at her opponent again.

For both defense and offense, Hunter alternated between scattering her barrage and sending out rapid-fire sniper shots.

They tore and stabbed at each other while both trying to gain as much ground as they could.

Kagami's weapons were accurate and powerful but few.

Hunter's weapons were numerous but weak.

To gain the best position, they both circled around, occasionally collided, and then moved away again.

Kagami felt the need to praise Hunter's adlibs.

Even with such heavy armor, the girl had not taken any obvious hits. Kagami had assumed she would have difficulty with defense since she was used to attacks and charges, but she was actually avoiding it all with the smallest amount of evasion needed.

"Well done, Hunter!"

"That's right!" shouted Hunter as their collision scattered sparks and she accelerated away. "I don't get America's help just for my cannon shots! I use them for my evasive actions too!"

"In that case..." Kagami shouted a question as she pursued and moved Dikaiosyne through the barrage. "If you have this much power, why don't you lend it to everyone else!? Isn't America supposed to be the world police!?"

"Then," shouted Hunter.

She broke through a morning cloud, let the light of her bullet wash over her as it broke one of Kagami's

blasts, and waved her right arm down below.

“Then look at this!”

In an instant of wind, Kagami saw something as she exchanged fire and hopped up as part of her evasive action.

As they moved from America’s west coast, the ground below should have contained a large city and the natural majesty of the Grand Canyon.

But it did not.

...Is this...?

Kagami looked down while forcibly passing below a barrage yet immediately ascending afterwards.

There was nothing but destruction.

A several kilometer wide hole sat in the middle of the city and the Grand Canyon had mostly collapsed like a sand castle crushed by a child.

The worst part was the kilometer wide craters

connecting east to west. And more could be seen far to the north and south.

“Do you understand now?”

Hunter arrived by her side. She punctuated her question by ramming her five hundred meter long Device into Kagami’s.

“This is the damage from Hexennacht ten years ago! This is what the Black Witch did with the power that leaked from the seal. In other words…”

They reached more ruins as she spoke.

The central United States, an area known for its industrial cities, was only a series of great gashes in the land.

“In other words, this great nation is not so great anymore.”

Horinouchi flew through the sky as the battle fought by the other two continued pulling away.

Even so, she could hear Hunter's voice.

"Ten years ago, our most skilled witches were killed and we lost our strength."

So...

"So America made a certain decision. To take responsibility as the world police and as the nation with the greatest military force, we decided to settle it all by ourselves."

Horinouchi heard her.

"Do you understand now!?"

A powerful light shot by to the starboard side.

The Hedgehog must have entered firing mode and used its main ether cannon. Several points of light linked together far in the eastern sky, but they were most likely Kagami's secondary cannon blasts being swept away.

Hunter had great strength, but...

"Do you understand now!?"

Hunter's voice seemed to be pressing her for an answer.

"My dad was a pilot and he loved flying. But..."

Horinouchi wondered why it was she did not want to know what followed that word.

"But ten years ago...he went missing."

She's the same, realized Horinouchi. *She's fighting with the same feelings in her heart.*

Yes, that's right, thought Hunter. *We must all be the same. We all have the same feelings in our hearts.*

"That's why I became a witch. And that's why I fly."

She had had no other choice. After all...

"By doing that, I thought I could see the same things my dad did. But you know what I saw there instead?"

She could even see it now. It was spread out below her cannon blasts and her speed.

“This ruined land!!”

And…

“That moon that never vanishes from the sky!”

She rammed Kagami again. Sparks flew and a great shaking reached her. She briefly gasped at the gaze viewing her from behind, but she managed to draw out her voice.

“So I made a decision of my own!”

“And what was that?”

“Well,” she answered amid the collision, pushing, and scraping. “I decided I would make sure I was the only one that had to feel like this.”

With those words, she saw Kagami’s shoulders relax.

“…”

The girl hung her head and spoke.

“You fool.”

Horinouchi looked up at what Kagami said.

...I was wrong.

She had thought everyone felt the same way, but there was one person here who did not.

There was a single reason for that which made so much sense: that girl was not from this world.

And that was why she was wrong and yet right.

From an outside perspective, Kagami was exactly right about their conflict and stubbornness. So...

"Thank you."

She heard those two simple words that Hunter spoke.

...You...

There was a lot she wanted to say. She wanted to speak with and exchange thoughts with this opponent. And if they could continue on together...

"Kagami."

Several thoughts came together to form a single thought. It did not matter how powerful this opponent was…

"Let's win this!"

You make it sound simple, thought Kagami with a bitter smile.

But she agreed. They had to defeat this opponent. But…

"What!?"

A sudden impact reached her. Hunter had been continually ramming and pushing her, but now the girl moved away. She started forward quite forcibly.

"Is she using her main cannon!?"

Hunter's Device used the air resistance to make a half-turn with a loop-the-loop. She was going for a close-range charge while flying upside down.

It was far too forceful. As things were, she did not

have the speed necessary to destroy Dikaiosyne with a collision.

...What is she trying to do!?

Kagami hurriedly shifted Dikaiosyne into firing mode. She already had a shell formed, so...

"Fire!"

With a great roar, light exploded out.

It would be nice if it hit, but it would still wear down her armor if it only grazed her. Except...

...She moved out of the way!?

Hunter's Device had moved down below Dikaiosyne.

Kagami immediately prepared her secondary cannons and fired down at the other girl during their slow passage.

Hunter also opened her secondary cannons and fired from close range.

"Ohhhh!"

Explosions of light and shockwaves burst between

them.

In that instant, Kagami realized what her opponent was really after.

Hunter fell from the sky and landed on top of Dikaiosyne as it shook.

Hunter had a single goal.

...I need to force her away!

Kagami's Device was sturdy. Secondary cannons and a light hit from the main cannon were not going to be enough. Plus, Kagami knew where the swing-by starting points were and was keeping Hunter away from them.

As things were, they would wear each other down and Hunter would ultimately have trouble dealing with the nearly undamaged Horinouchi.

So she had jumped over.

She had given her Magino Device instructions to continue onwards, jumped off of it, and ran along Kagami's Device.

"You're mine!"

Kagami quickly raised her Normal Device to defend, but Hunter hit her, sword and all.

The Hedgehog's pile bunker was prepared on her left arm. She came in low, planted her feet on the Magino Device's armor, and based her movement on the rotation of her hips in order to...

...Hit her upwards!

She scored a clean hit on the Normal Device that Kagami held up as a shield.

The girl floated up from the Magino Device and Hunter felt the tactile feedback of the blow.

"Kh!"

With that groan, Kagami vanished from before her eyes.

The hit from the Hedgehog had blown her away and she crashed into the guard of the great sword.

A roar and smoke rose from where she landed and the five hundred meter Device shook.

But Hunter did not care. She simply ran forward without losing the momentum of her strike.

“— — — — —”

She jumped down to the Hedgehog passing by below.

Kagami peeled herself from Dikaiosyne’s guard while feeling both impressed and worried.

She wanted to praise Hunter’s tactics. She had known the girl was a close-range fighter, but…

…I never thought she would jump from her Magino Frame to challenge me to a close-range fight.

Kagami realized she was still too close-minded and decided to try it herself if she ever had the

opportunity. However...

"Hunter!"

She looked back where Hunter's Magino Device was twisting around.

Its main cannon was aimed her way and light filled its barrel.

She could not avoid being shot, but the half-charged blast could not destroy Dikaiosyne. Also, firing in the direction she was traveling would slow her down.

...*Which means...*

A quick glance at the spell circle answered it all.

There was a swing-by starting point right over there, so...

"Goodbye."

With that word, Hunter fired.

"...!"

Dikaiosyne shook from the blast and it was shifted off course. A moment later, the wind was whipped

up.

Hunter's Magino Device had gained the speed of an orbiting satellite.

It was a sheltered form of high-speed travel. The wind and everything else was deflected by the Hedgehog's divine protection.

"I've done it now..."

Kagami's word of scolding remained in Hunter's mind.

...I'm a fool, huh?

In that case, Horinouchi must be as well, but...

"I just parted ways with them. And..."

After pulling in the communications spell circle from the ones opened in front of her, she took a breath and faced only forward.

"HQ, this match is officially only against Horinouchi, so I'll target her. ...Is she over Brazil right now?"

That was perfect. That plus Hunter's current swing-by direction produced an interesting result.

"I'm returning to the coast of Japan."

What would happen if she targeted Horinouchi who would have lost sight of her?

"Yes, it's time to snipe her from halfway around the globe."

When Horinouchi received a report that Hunter's location had been lost, she quickly shifted Akerindou's course. She moved over the southern ocean to make sure no damage would be done to any cities.

Plus, she knew her enemy would know her location, so continuing in a straight line would only make her a sitting duck. But...

"Where did she go...?"

"Lady Mitsuru, I believe we can determine the enemy's location."

“She already knows where I am, right?”

It was possible the girl had already fired from far away, so when it came to firing an attack or an interception…

“Can we make it in time?”

“Yes, but to do so…” Koutarou spoke sharply. “I would like your help.”

Chapter 16: Then What Should I Do?

Chapter 16

“Then What Should I Do?”

I know that

I know that

It only took Hunter an instant to fire.

She was flying over the ocean south of Japan.

The Seventh Fleet's Silent Service had searched out this spot that avoided detection by the Shinto guardian deities.

So once she was in position, she only needed to align herself with the swing-by satellite passing by overhead and then fire.

An explosive blast filled the air and the bullet seemed to skip thrice as it flew east.

That was all.

Her comrades would guide it for her. They knew Horinouchi's location, so they would precisely guide the bullet to her.

Unlike with Kagami, Horinouchi's Magino Frame could not avoid taking damage, so this would win

the battle.

Even if the girl did try to defend, she was over a foreign sea and she did not know where Hunter was. Even if the Horinouchi Group had a wide reach, they would not have reached the ocean quite yet. She might have managed over land, but the sea was a different story.

The bullet was fast enough that it would all be over by the time she saw it.

The battle was already settled if Horinouchi really did not know the direction Hunter was firing from.

“Which means I just have to wait for it to hit.”

Hunter was not sure if she should breathe a sigh of relief just yet, but the sun had already risen to the height of “early morning” rather than “predawn”.

As if following the sunlight, she looked to Japan with a telescope spell.

“Ahh, ahh…”

The base of Mount Fuji had a large black crater torn

into it. That was the result of her attack on Kagami.

Seeing it discouraged her a little.

She felt bad for doing the same thing as the Black Witch. At the same time, she recalled Kagami's rebuke and smiled bitterly.

...That's right.

She did believe her actions had an individual form of justice behind them, but how long had it been since someone had scolded and tried to stop her instead of accepting and supporting her?

It was a nostalgic feeling and it brought a song to her lips.

"And where is that band who so vauntingly swore,

"That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion,

"A home and a country shall leave us no more?

"Their blood has washed out their foul footstep's pollution.

"No refuge could save the hireling and slave.

“From the terrors of flight or the gloom of the grave.

“And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave.

“O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave!”

That was the third verse of the Star-Spangled Banner.

Once she finished releasing her song into the sky, a morning breeze seemed to blow in response.

“Representative Hunter! The bullet will hit in twenty seconds!”

The view from the satellite above reached her spell circle.

Even from the sky, Akerindou’s great form was visible over the sea. A digital line was added arriving from the west and that straight line and arrow were labelled with the word “bullet”.

“Oh.”

The footage revealed an explosion of ether light and a giant pillar of water.

Just as she thought it had been a direct hit, an unexpected color filled the spell circle.

<Warning>

Hunter gasped at what that must mean.

Something was moving inside the spell circle.

“The enemy Magino Frame…has survived!”

“It missed!?”

What did that mean? It should have been impossible to intercept that bullet without knowing what trajectory it was taking, but the satellite footage zoomed in on the enemy.

Akerindou was pointed straight up at her eye in the sky. And…

“Horinouchi!”

The girl was looking straight up at the satellite in orbit.

<Closed>

A moment later, Horinouchi's cannon blast destroyed the satellite, but...

"Don't tell me she could see where I was."

Hunter had supposedly left the range of her Shinto detection.

"Oh? What do you think you are doing there?"

A voice reached her from behind.

It was several kilometers away, but a Magino Frame was approaching with the shimmering heat of acceleration light enveloping itself. The great sword was definitely damaged, but...

"Over here. This is no time to be distracted."

"Kagami!"

Hunter wanted to ask how this was possible.

...She shouldn't have been able to catch up!

Hunter had used several swing-by pathways to reach this point. The only way to track that would be to follow the remnant ether light, but that method had to be done immediately.

Kagami would have needed a means of gaining speed rivalling the swing-by method.

“How did you catch up during all that?”

Hunter spotted some vanishing light on the back of Kagami’s Magino Frame, but it was not the light of a thruster. There were eight of them and they had clearly been stabbed in after the fact.

…Horinouchi’s arrows!?

“Don’t tell me you had her shoot you to accelerate you!”

“Precisely!”

She really is an honorable sort of insane, thought Hunter.

What kind of idiot would have their partner shoot them just because they needed some speed? The

kind right in front of her, apparently. But she had relied on her defenses to "eat" the hard hit. The arrows had pierced into the Magino Frame, but Kagami must have absorbed them and their speed.

...This is the problem with that craft-style power of hers!

Kagami pointed at the dumbfounded girl.

"Hunter!"

The obvious idiot smiled.

"This is where things get interesting!"

Kagami had Dikaiosyne charge forward.

Hunter immediately opened several spell circles around herself.

...Are you trying to escape!?

Those spells were likely meant to coordinate her swing-by movement with her mainland, so the girl was about to take high-speed flight. And...

“I will not let you escape!”

To accelerate, Kagami used Horinouchi’s acceleration arrows remaining on Dikaiosyne’s back end. The great sword charged forward like it had been kicked.

It struck the center of the giant Magino Frame’s stern as if gouging into the seam there.

“That was not enough to reach the bullet formation area, was it!?”

Hunter immediately began her flight.

“Dammit!”

But she missed the swing-by.

The massive Magino Device had lost its powerful acceleration method, so now it was Kagami’s turn.

She was using her Normal Device to control Dikaiosyne, so she pushed it forward toward the stern of Hunter’s Magino Device.

“Charge!”

Hunter realized she was being pushed.

She could see a few of Horinouchi's acceleration lights vanishing from the back of the great sword. There had been eight to begin with, but now there were only five.

Her opponent was losing the source of her speed, but the speed she did have was enough.

...It rivals my swing-by method!?

Horinouchi had focused and refined that power in order to tear into the moon. Meanwhile, Hunter's comrades informed her of the next swing-by point, but...

...I won't make it!

As each new point arrived, she failed to arrive in time and missed it.

Kagami was predicting her actions perfectly. The Horinouchi Group was most likely observing from the surface and determining what satellites Hunter

was primarily using. If so...

"Secondary cannons!"

A shootout began from point-blank range.

She prepared every last cannon and fired on the great sword stabbing into her from behind.

She hit.

A shock ran through her own Magino Device, light struck at random, and warning lights indicated damage on the rear thrusters and elsewhere, but she did not care. With each tremor, Kagami's Magino Device shook and nearly threw her off.

That may have been why Kagami accelerated and plunged her blade even deeper inside.

...Is this how you want to decide this!?

But it was not enough.

Hunter's secondary cannons continued tearing apart Kagami's Magino Device. She had an overwhelming advantage in number of cannons. When a close-

range barrage would work, the Hedgehog would be the one doing the pushing.

But then she realized Kagami was only using her secondary cannons to intercept while raising the speed of her charge.

...Why!?

Even this speed was not enough to break Hunter's armor. Hunter was accelerating as well and the Hedgehog was sturdy.

Then why? she wondered.

"Representative Hunter! We've secured a point location, so please wait a moment! Also, we've confirmed your current heading! The enemy is accelerating you toward..."

There was someone behind her by the rising sun in the east.

"The other enemy, the Rank 4!"

Hunter realized what Kagami was trying to do.

“A pincer attack!”

This was not a normal pincer attack. Kagami was accelerating Hunter toward Horinouchi so the third girl could fire on Hunter with all her strength.

It was a forceful use of physics thanks to their relative speeds.

...Just how much does she worship attack power!?

What is this? Does it have to do with the Japanese love of giant breasts? I remember everyone laughing about that when we stayed up all night that one time.

Wait, that’s not the point!

This method was completely insane, but it did make sense. After all, Hunter’s own Hedgehog gained enough speed from its swing-by method to destroy another Magino Frame with only that. If she was hit at these speeds, it was possible it could sink her in a single blow.

Plus, she was up against a unit of two. Even if she

destroyed Kagami or made sure Kagami was caught in her own destruction, they would still win if Horinouchi survived.

...In which case...

She pushed herself in a straight line through the morning air while leaving several vapor trails behind her.

“Representative Hunter! You are now in range of the Rank 4!”

That was exactly when Kagami raised her voice while pushing Hunter forward with her powerful acceleration.

“Fire!”

Horinouchi viewed her enemy through a telescope spell.

A giant form in the west was being pushed and accelerated toward her.

She must have noticed Horinouchi directly ahead because she had opened her shield instead of using her cannon form.

...I need to break through that armor.

Hesitating would be meaningless. She had only one chance and, even from this distance, the acceleration light from Kagami's rear thrusters could be seen weakening.

She would begin slowing soon.

Once that happened, it was all over. Once Hunter could escape with her own acceleration, she would change course and destroy the two of them individually. So...

...It has to be now!

As soon as she thought that, she saw an explosion over the western sea.

"What!?"

It was the white explosion of water vapor created when something collided with the atmosphere at

high speed.

...Their Device's exploded?

No, the white was nowhere near large enough for that. And soon, Horinouchi's telescope spell revealed what had happened.

"Hunter purged the front starboard side of her Magino Device, didn't she!?"

Air resistance caused the entire Device to groan, but Hunter did not hesitate.

Her secondary cannons were lodging their shots in Kagami's Device, and...

...Turn!

She purged her front starboard armor. The thick multi-layer armor became fragments of ether in the air, lightening her starboard side, but that left the frame and transformation structure exposed.

"Air brake!!"

As soon as water vapor audibly exploded, the Hedgehog creaked to the right as it was pushed.

While still moving horizontally, she collided with the air to the front and right. Next, the wind poured inside the armor and internal components halfway along the starboard side, blasting away the central starboard armor.

But that damage eliminated the excess stress. The starboard side skidded along the air and the port side flowed forward.

“Ohhh!”

She turned her starboard rear thruster to the right and applied the maximum pressure.

She made a turn and no longer seemed to care about Kagami behind her.

She used their great speed to make a full 180 degree turn with the great sword still piercing her stern.

That thrust Kagami’s Magino Frame toward Horinouchi and…

“Representative Hunter!”

A swing-by point was coming, so she raised her right hand to activate the spell. Meanwhile, she heard Kagami’s voice from behind.

“But there was not supposed to be another point around here! Could it be…!?”

“That’s right. I told you I had the support of the US military, didn’t I?”

It was obvious what she had done.

“I had one of the satellites alter its orbit to come this way.”

A point of light was moving east in the sky above.

The forcible change of orbit meant it was now falling out of orbit, but Hunter only needed to pursue that shooting star.

“Here I go!”

That swing-by would take her east, toward Horinouchi’s cannon blast.

“You said this is where things get interesting, didn’t you!?”

Horinouchi understood the situation.

The other two were starting to lose speed, but they began charging toward her with new acceleration. And now Kagami’s Dika-whatever was being held forward instead of pushing from behind.

Kagami was likely doing her best to resist, but most of her secondary cannons had been destroyed and there was no more light in her rear thrusters. Also…

“Now!” shouted Hunter. “Are you willing to shoot your own partner, Horinouchi!?”

U.A.H.F. of NORAD was filled with excitement.

They were doing their best to direct the falling satellite directly over the Rank 4’s head. At the same time, they were sending the optimum course to Hunter and having her make course corrections

with the Hedgehog's accelerators.

"Damn, I didn't think she would actually pull off that 180!"

"Yeah, I kind of thought she might as well just try to escape!"

Everyone sent back their confirmation work, stood up, and looked to the spell circle main monitor.

The commander spoke over the communicator.

"Representative Hunter, your armor cannot be pierced even if it comes down to a shootout after your approach."

"I know." The witch they supported replied with a ring of dignity in her voice. "Victory to America!"

"Now, it's time for you to lose, Horinouchi!"

Horinouchi inhaled at Hunter's words.

She was hesitant. Of course she was. But...

...*Yes.*

She recalled her actions concerning her rank, her own displeasure, and Kagami's tears over her mother.

…*Mother.*

The scene from ten years ago grew clear in her memories.

That had been her last time to speak with her mother.

She had known what was going to happen to her, but she had cried and asked her not to leave her all alone.

But she remembered clearly what her mother had said.

"Don't worry. The god of this world seems to have trouble with loneliness, so I'm sure you will find someone important to you as well."

"You mean…?"

"Someone who – like me – will smile when you

smile and cry when you cry. And because of that, you will be able to trust them and continue on with them."

She had wondered where someone like that could be.

She had not wanted anyone else to feel the way she did, so she had intended to remain isolated.

But...

...*Elsie Hunter*.

Even someone ranked higher than her felt the same way.

And someone had rebuked that girl.

It had felt like a rebuke against this entire world, yet it had been spoken as a simple observation.

"Horinouchi!" shouted Kagami's voice. "Trust in me, Manko!"

"Don't call me thaaaaat!"

She shouted back and fired at the same time.

Kagami smiled at Horinouchi's attack.

...I would expect no less!

There was no hint of hesitation or restraint. The high-speed shot produced five explosions of water vapor as it flew in from far to the east.

It was definitely coming, so...

"Charge!"

Kagami used her last acceleration to drive the tip of her great sword into Hunter's Magino Frame.

Hunter frowned on top of the Device up ahead.

"You're wasting your effort!"

"Are you worried for me, Hunter!? But..."

Kagami raised her right arm.

"Dikaiosyne, firing form!"

"That won't accomplish anything!" shouted Hunter.

Kagami was digging into her armor, but...

“Your attack will at best only damage my rear thrusters!”

“What are you talking about? Attacking is Horinouchi’s job.”

She operated Dikaiosyne as if to prove that.

She poured every last ounce of power into the acceleration pathway and white light shined from the pathway meant for the shell to travel down.

“Shell formation area…purge.”

Hunter realized what was happening.

…Did she transform the pincer attack into an acceleration cannon!?

Kagami stood before her. Below her, the great sword’s acceleration pathway was exposed after losing the rear shell formation area.

Horinouchi’s arrow arrived there.

Technically, that was probably due to Hunter’s own

course corrections.

The flying arrow stabbed into the acceleration pathway of Kagami's great sword and raced through it.

"Open shell acceleration spell inside the barrel!!"

Kagami's voice was followed by the destruction of her sword-shaped Magino Device.

The Device itself could not withstand the power creating the acceleration pathway.

But it only needed an instant.

The relative speed of the swing-by, the acceleration provided by Horinouchi, and the additional acceleration provided in exchange for Kagami's Magino Device joined together.

"Kh!"

The power itself burst inside the heavy armor.

The destruction only took an instant.

The servant managing the Device prioritized protecting Hunter, its master, so when the massive amount of kinetic energy exploded inside, the armor, motors, and transformation system were all abandoned. To make sure nothing obstructed the dispersal of the energy, it was all given over to the destruction and explosion, leaving only the main frame and the base where the servant's master stood.

"…!"

Magino Frame Hedgehog exploded and fell silent.

A great noise and clouds of ether light filled the morning sky. Even its giant framework came apart as it slowly fell toward the sea.

Atop the crumbling Magino Frame, Kagami stood before Hunter who had fallen to her knees.

Both of their Magino Frames had been destroyed and neither of them could continue fighting. Hunter

must have known that because she fell backwards onto her butt, stroked her servant's spell circle, and put it away.

"Damn, I lost! Do you have anything to say!?"

"I have not lived a life worthy of saying anything here. But..."

Kagami took a breath before speaking to Hunter.

"Lend us your strength, America. Burning yourself away in a grudge is not what you should be doing. You need act as the world police and lend your strength to those who lack it. And..."

The hand she held out had lost its power arm, but that did not matter.

"How about you start by accepting my help here, Elsie Hunter?"

Hunter looked up into the sky as she slowly fell.

The moon was beginning to vanish there and she

could only see the morning sun.

Of course, that was only because the moonlight was hidden by the sunlight, but…

“You’re such an idiot.”

She took Kagami’s hand with a bare hand that no longer wore her Magino Form.

“Why would you go this far to tell me something even elementary schoolers understand?”

She felt the same applied to herself, but she left that unsaid.

Chapter 17: I Remember

Chapter 17

“I Remember”

Distance can be made meaningless
By density

Distance can be made meaningless

By density

The next day, word of the rank change spread like wildfire thanks to the school news.

But something occurred to Horinouchi as she walked the short distance from her campus residence to the school building…

…Those looks of curiosity aren't due to the rank change.

The girl next to her could not have looked more out of place in her school uniform.

She did not have her textbooks or other school supplies yet, so she did not even have a bag. Oddly enough, while her footsteps had rung loudly in the shoes she wore with her suit, she walked silently in the heels of her uniform's shoes.

Of course, Horinouchi walked just as silently.

…I stand out enough already.

“Here, the rules allow the third years to enter from the bottom.”

“Is that the same idea as rich families living in single-story residences?”

Horinouchi nearly asked what her house had been like, but she stopped. She did not feel that close to the girl quite yet. But…

“That was supposed to be a roundabout way of asking about your family,” said Kagami. “Did you not pick up on that?”

“I chose not to answer because it would sound like I was bragging.”

“Is that so? …My family had a three-story house with an attic.”

The way she laughed frustrated Horinouchi for some reason.

The general division school building was made up of a left and right building connected down the center. Their large classroom was on the eastern end. As

they walked down the hallway, Kagami spoke while facing forward.

“If you want to say anything before we reach the classroom, then say it. Oh, but the fact that I look stunning in this uniform goes without saying, so do not bother. So what do you want to say, Manko?”

“Stop calling me that!”

“Then would Mitsuru be better?”

“I only ever let my parents call me that. But…” She felt a hint of resignation. “I don’t want you calling me anything weird, so call me that when we’re alone. Otherwise, call me Horinouchi.”

“What a complicated girl.”

“Well, I am the resident of a world you created.”

Kagami smiled a bit at that. Up ahead, the news of the rank change hung on the wall.

Horinouchi’s name and Kagami’s name were both written next to Rank 3.

“Honestly.”

How long were they going to be working together? And…

“I received an email from Hunter. She wanted to know if we were free this Sunday.”

“You told her we were, didn’t you?”

She had not even needed to ask if Kagami was.

“I am looking forward to it.”

Kagami smiled and opened the classroom door.

“Everyone! Nice to meet you! I am Kagami Kagami, a visitor from another world! Come on, Manko! Get in here! You really are shy, aren’t you!?”

Horinouchi decided it was time to teach her a lesson.

Final Chapter: Let's Go Together

Final Chapter

“Let’s Go Together”

A reunion
Is the beginning of friendship

A reunion

Is the beginning of friendship

Hunter prepared for her future.

She was packing her things.

Her room was in the special equipment division. It was a special forty-five square meter room given to Rankers. Those who loved machinery would apparently bring machine tools into their room and work with them, but it was nothing but wasted space for Hunter.

However, she was not leaving here. She was still the top of the special equipment division.

Her destination was the pier.

She had contacted the two in Rank 3 to ask if they wanted to hold a sort of party to celebrate their Ranker battle the other day.

It would be weird to reconcile their differences

there, but they could at least take a less hostile relationship.

It was the same as the winners' podium in sports. Whether they had won or lost, everyone who had given it their very best would recognize each other's efforts.

It was mostly a ceremonial or traditional thing, but those two had also interested her on a more personal level. Kagami had her insane ether control ability, but there was a lot she wanted to ask Horinouchi as well.

Her father had not particularly liked Japan, but he had trained in karate at the base and she had based her combat style off of that.

Horinouchi's style was a shrine maiden, aka a Japanese shaman.

Shaman-style witches tended to go deep in the forest, get tattoos, give sacrificial offerings of pigs and sheep, and perform strange chanting dances. There was also an American shaman-style, but they

used a 75mm gun as a Normal Device, which seemed like it would only work when combined with overwhelming numbers.

At any rate, Horinouchi's Form was from the same culture as Hunter's, so their designs were somewhat similar. Plus, Horinouchi was the real deal that represented Japan. Even if the design of Hunter's Form had no real flaws, a real Japanese witch would probably see it as an American karate-style.

What would a real Japanese witch think of it? If one of the top rankers had been a Japanese karate witch, she might have had a chance to fight them, but things had not turned out that way.

"I wonder."

She had fallen to the #4 spot, but she had not given up on or lamented her skill.

She had hit a setback in her Ranker battles.

She had seen a lot of what these opponents could do, so something different might happen if they did it

again.

That was all this was.

But…

"…I wonder."

She had no complaints about her strength, but her motivation toward Hexennacht had fallen.

But not because she had lost.

…I was taken pretty far.

It had been a tough battle.

A witch battle came down to the maintenance and heating of their Phlogiston Heart, so it was a competition of willpower. The more intense the battle grew, the more of herself was drawn out.

What had that meant for her in that Ranker battle?

She had been cornered by Horinouchi and she had cornered Horinouchi. If the other girl had been that desperate, then she must have shown a similar level of willpower.

After all, how many people had lost nothing at all during the Hexennacht ten years before?

That was why those with power needed to wash away their grudges and defeat the Black Witch.

But…

"A fool, huh?"

She honestly did not understand what Kagami had meant by that word, but she had definitely thought the girl might just be right.

Normally, she should have told Kagami not to mock her. After all, she had a responsibility to the people supporting her and the people she needed to protect.

But…

…I wonder.

She finished packing as she thought. She had enough clothes for a few days and there was barbecue meat and some other things in the refrigerator. She could keep the food cold with a cooling spell she had learned at school. After

dropping the spell circle in the insulated bag and carrying the bag over her shoulder, she looked like a girl ready to head out for some summer fun.

She began to wonder if she should have gotten some sunglasses.

She did not even need her motorcycle to reach the pier, so she could leave her helmet behind. That just left her shoes.

“The normal ones should work.”

She walked outside in some deck shoes with crushed heels.

It was a sunny day.

The pier was surprisingly far away when walking from the dorms. Passing through the center of the campus, and thus the courtyard’s forest, was fastest, but she was not in that much of a hurry. She walked around the courtyard from west to south, passed by the front of the gym, and then by the side of the

general division school building.

As she walked, she checked her servant hedgehog in its spell circle. It had already been repaired and tuned from the fleet on the Pacific, so it was sleeping peacefully.

In other words, I've got the day off. And that's an order, Attack Spell Major Elsie Hunter.

...Am I trying to force myself into high spirits?

She wondered that as she walked.

She left the school grounds, crossed the road, and reached the path to the edge of the bay.

The sky was blue and the bay had the salty smell of the sea.

It reminded her of the past.

She had often gone out to eat with her father. He had been bad at cooking, so he had always tried to eat out. But that was expensive, so instead of going to a proper restaurant, they had often used a portable stove set to have a crude barbecue on the beach.

...Wait, am I whitewashing my memories? I say "often", but it was only about three times a week. Well, I guess that's actually quite a lot.

"Eat more meat!" her father had always said. "It'll help you grow up big and strong, Elsie! And I'm good at grilling meat!"

You idiot. Eating so much meat automatically gave me a restricted carb diet which kept me so small.

She had only learned that upon coming here. When she had asked the school doctor, she had been told the following:

"Hm. You may have been getting the other nutrients from the barbecue sauce."

Did you hear that, dad? Then again, I did get a fair amount of vegetables. From juice.

But...

"I wonder."

What would her father think of this situation if he were still alive and walking by her side?

What would he say about the fact that she was a witch, that she represented America, and that she had lost?

“Eat more meat.”

Yeah, he’d say that. He’d definitely say that.

But she had to wonder. If he were alive, she would have felt like mankind had won the previous Hexennacht. In that case, would she have even been doing this? And if so…

“Oh, I know.”

She knew the answer.

If she had still been doing this even though mankind won the previous Hexennacht and even though her father had survived…

“Then papa would definitely scold me.”

After all…

“He’d tell me this was his job and that I shouldn’t be doing it.”

That's right. And that's why I'm a fool.

Everyone had expected this of her and hoped she would do it, but the person she cared about most would not have. He had flown through the sky to make sure she did not have to.

Everyone had lost something ten years ago.

But…

"You fool."

What was it she had really wanted?

And…

"I'm a fool. And I'm going to keep being a fool for a little longer, papa."

After realizing something so important so late, she decided to disobey her father. After all…

"If you were here right now, I'd help you out. Even if you didn't want me to, I'd find a way to do it. I know I would. And…"

She looked to the pier.

“There’s someone even more foolish than me, so I’ve got to help them.”

She opened her mouth and a song escaped her lips below the blue sky.

It was the fourth verse of the Star-Spangled Banner.

“Oh thus be it ever when freemen shall stand

“Between their loved ones and wild war’s desolation.

“Blest with victry and peace, may the heav’n-rescued land.

“Praise the pow’r that hath made and preserved us a nation.

“Then conquer we must when our cause it is just.

“And this be our motto: ‘In God is our trust!’

“And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave,

“O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave!”

Hunter arrived at the pier.

A two ton truck filled with maids waited in front of the pier and a brand new car was parked behind it.

Kagami (who wore a suit even though it was summer), Horinouchi, and an unfamiliar man stood by the car. She guessed the man was the driver.

They were on their way to Shonan. They had invited her after her initial invitation, but she did not mind. Her invitation had mostly been from her curiosity in them anyway.

Also, she had something to teach them.

American-style Frames could be summoned quickly and she felt teaching them how to do that would be meaningful.

After all, they had accepted her reservations and stuck to their own strength.

She had lost.

…Yeah, that's right.

She had lost, but that allowed her to do something.

—Thanks.

The world police, America, and the world's greatest military force were not to be wielded on one's own.

"Now, then."

She adjusted the position of the luggage hanging from her shoulder and she spoke.

"Did you know you can lose weight by eating meat?"

—*Thanks*.

Afterword

And here we have Clash of Hexennacht that I began in parallel with Kyoukai Senjou no Horizon. A straightforward magical girl story is unusual for me, but I must have had a good image of it in my head, because writing it was really easy.

When I think about the old witch girls like Hana no Ko *n*n (not "I" and "ra") or Magical E* (not "ro")[3], I can't help but think they must have been blasting at each other with magical attacks like this. I can really feel the Japanese love for big ships and giant guns in that thought process.

Anyway, this project didn't come about by random chance. It's actually based on the plot I wrote for the manga version drawn by Tsurugi Yasuyuki-san. Tsurugi-san was burned out after finishing his last long serialization and had gotten married, so I found him at a certain event looking like a corpse and

unable to come up with any ideas. I ended up offering to give him a plot to make a manga out of.

Come to think of it, that kind of was by random chance.

If you pick up the manga version, it should help Tsurugi-san raise his kid, so how about giving it a thought? You'll have a lot more motivation when carrying it up the register if you imagine that one volume might become a clasp on a backpack. And wow, this introduction has gotten heavy.

Anyway, time for the usual chat.

"It doesn't matter what, so how about we talk about witch girls?"

"Non > Megu."

"You're bringing up an anime from forty years ago? But it's true Non was a good wife who did everything she could behind the scenes and had a manly respect for one's duty."

"She was a true rival. But something occurred to me

when I was watching the reruns the other day. The family Megu lives with has their memories magically altered to make everything fit, but they get that done three times if you include when she leaves and comes back. If it was a cyberpunk story, she would've fried their brains."

"Witch girl anime from back in the day didn't hold back, did they?"

After that, we continued discussing why Non is so great.

Anyway, I was putting plenty of work into this, but my usual background music for that work was Kanno Yoko's Cyberbird. I love the sense of flight it gives you.

And this time I was wondering who the biggest fool was. Next time will be another battle against a higher ranker, but that will probably be after Horizon and GT. Please wait a little longer.

April 2015. A morning of continuing rain.

-Kawakami Minoru

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ Means "Vermilion Gentian".
2. ↑ The kanji for Mitsuru + the feminine suffix "ko" = "Manko", which also means vagina.
3. ↑ "Inran" and "Ero" mean "lewd" and "erotic" respectively.